

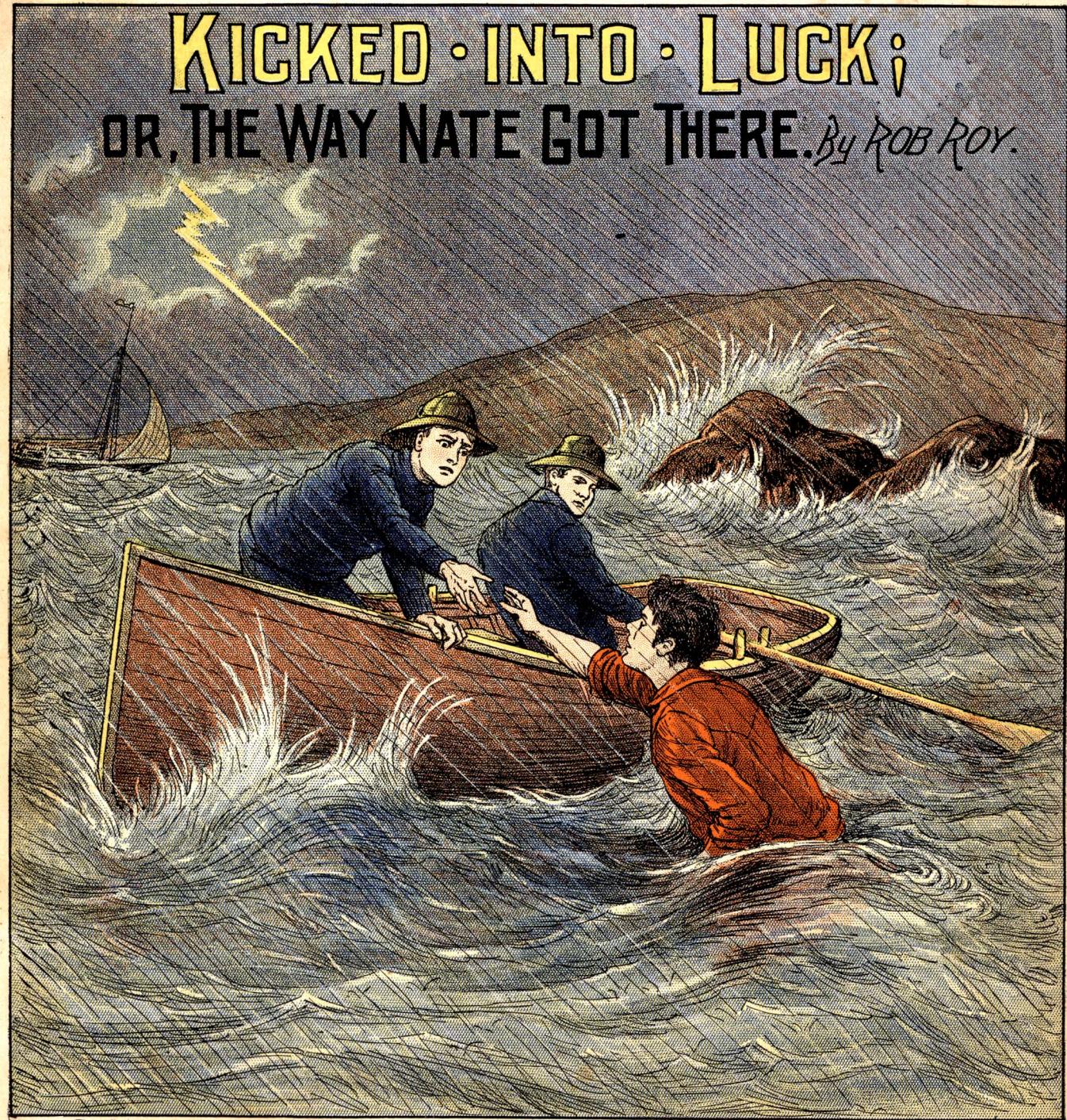
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WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY.** EVERY WEEK.

KICKED • INTO • LUCK;
OR, THE WAY NATE GOT THERE. *By ROB ROY.*



"Your life is safe now!" cheered the stranger, reaching out a strong arm to the boy on the sunken reef. "My life?" chattered Nate. "I've lost far more than that—lost everything that I had to make life at all worth living!"

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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Kicked Into Luck

OR,

THE WAY NATE GOT THERE

By ROB ROY

CHAPTER I.

KICKED, AND HARD!

"Listen to Fred Joyce! There's the boy who's going to get ahead in life!"

It was Billy Bragg who spoke, and at Nate's party.

Nobody ever accused Nate of any disposition to get ahead.

He was seventeen, and what had he ever done, except eat and sleep, and work when he had to.

"It was getting that job as telegraph operator this summer, Fred, that gave you your start," put in Will Slater.

"Humph!" retorted Fred, a handsome, dark-eyed lad of eighteen. "No; it wasn't, either. It was just my ideas of push that put me where I am."

Conceit rang in that voice.

Yet it wasn't a bad form of conceit, either. It was the self-pride of a fellow who had thought and hustled for what he had. Fred had a right to be proud.

"How did you ever come to learn telegraphing, Fred?" asked Jim Treat, who was a fairly recent comer in this little sea-coast town of Dreamhaven.

"How'd I learn?" asked Fred, laughingly, as he glanced around to see if all the girls were listening. Kate Tremont was, anyway.

"Why," Fred went on, "Farrell taught me, so I could help him out Tuesday and Friday nights, when he wanted to go and see his girl. It was I who put him up to teaching me. I fooled around, and spent a lot of time at the

station, earning nothing at the time. But I was learning a trade, and learning it free of cost. Then, when Farrell got laid off for four months for letting that freight go by, and almost causing a collision with the passenger-train, I just checked my way into the job. Held it just four months until Farrell came back. Got forty-five dollars a month. Lived with the folks, so didn't have to spend a cent. Saved all the money, and bought my team of horses to-day."

Fred looked around beamingly over the crowd, but his glance rested longest on the shining eyes of Kit Tremont. She was smiling back at him.

"You're going to do mighty well this winter, ain't you, Fred?" demanded Billy Bragg, who was Fred's chum and devoted admirer.

"Well," said Fred, trying hard to keep his tone modest, "with my team I'm going to get four dollars a day every pleasant day this winter, teaming logs out of the woods. That ain't so bad."

"Bad?" echoed Nate's middle-aged Aunt Minnie. "I call it downright good pay for a boy of eighteen. I do hope, Fred, you'll do as well all through your life."

"Why, Mrs. Lawrence," protested Fred, warmly, "I don't intend to stop at log-teaming. I'm going to make money, put it by and get ahead. By the time I'm twenty-one I mean to have money enough to start in contracting."

"And you'll do it, too, Fred," said Billy Bragg, who was never so happy as when praising his chum.

Nate Fletcher felt miserable enough when he saw the whole crowd around Fred—even Kate Tremont.

It was Kit's manifest interest in Fred and the latter's performances that hurt our young friend most of all.

For, 'way back in his bashful heart, Nate had wished for two years that Kit would take more interest in him.

This was Nate's party, given him through the good-natured indulgence of Aunt Minnie Lawrencee, with whom Nate lived.

Nate's party, but Fred Joyce, with his new prosperity and his big chances for the future, was the hero of the evening.

Dreamhaven was a small place, without any very rich residents.

The people there were plain, hard-working Americans, who earned their dollars slowly and parted with them cautiously.

There was a good public school there. Boys had a chance to make a decent start in life.

The farming and lumbering, the fishing and some work on the railroad gave the men of the town a fair chance to make a living and to bring up families in decent comfort.

But that was all. Most people in the town lived and died without having seen much of the world.

Most of the smart boys, as is the rule everywhere in slow towns, moved away when they grew up.

There was plenty of vim, plenty of "go" in these Dreamhaven boys. Plenty of health, cheer and good looks among the girls.

Kate Tremont, who was the sole daughter of the town's one dressmaker, was the beauty of the place.

Had there been money enough behind Kate to dress her as a beauty should be dressed, and had she had a chance to go out into the world, she would have had wealthy suitors at her feet.

But a Dreamhaven dressmaker had little in the way of money. Kate was expected to marry one of the Dreamhaven boys in time, and settle down as the town's other women had done.

So far Kate, who was seventeen, had showed no disposition to accept serious attentions from any lover.

That was Nate's one hope, as he gazed at her to-night. She was in no hurry. Perhaps, later on, there would be a chance for him.

So thinking, Nate strolled disconsolately out into the kitchen of the little farm cottage.

After him came Aunt Minnie, all hustle and all bustle, her mind seemingly wholly on getting the party-supper in shape.

Aunt Minnie wasn't what you would call rich.

She owned this little nine-acre place free and clear. She raised what she could on it, with Nate's help. He was not always the best helper; for, at times, for days, he would only dream of work.

Aunt Minnie had her soldier's widow's pension of twelve dollars a month from the Government. For the rest, it was her hustling, not her nephew's, that kept the place going.

As soon as she reached the kitchen, Aunt Minnie closed

the door on the laughter and the chatter going on in the "setting-room" and the parlor.

"I declare, Nate," she murmured, "it does me good to see a young fellow getting along the way Fred Joyce is doing."

"He's a good fellow, and lucky," Nate declared.

"Lucky?" sniffed Aunt Minnie. "Do you know how folks become lucky? Mostly by getting up in the morning early and hustling and working for luck all day long! You could have had that telegraphing job all summer, just the same as Fred did, but for one thing."

"What's that one thing?" asked Nate, moodily.

"You ain't as smart as Fred," declared his aunt, with what was meant to be kindness, but the words stung and hurt. "You hain't got the brains and the push that Fred Joyce has."

"Maybe I haven't," Nate sighed, watching Aunt Minnie cut into the pies.

"Nate!" uttered his aunt, sharply, as she looked up keenly at him, "what on earth are you going to do? You'll have, before winter's over, all the schooling this place can give you. Then, what are you going to do to be a MAN?"

"I don't know," Nate said, half-wonderingly.

"Humph! Then it's time you woke up and found out! By the time you've got your first job, a fellow like Fred Joyce will be well-fixed and married to Kit Tremont."

Kit! There it was again! Nate, with a choke in his throat, opened the door and stepped into the next room.

For a wonder, Kit Tremont was sitting on a sofa alone. Fred Joyce was showing the boys—and the girls—a new trick in bunting.

For once in his life Nate Fletcher acted with decision. He plumped himself into the seat beside Kit Tremont.

His heart was beating fast, but he came to another decision.

"Kit," he whispered, "I'm going out on the front porch."

"Are you?" asked Kit, not in the least surprised.

"Yes; will you do me a great favor, Kit—a great big one?"

"What?" inquired Kit, calm-eyed and politely interested.

"Slip out after me, will you?"

"What?" demanded Kit, now permitting herself to be surprised. "Run after a boy?"

But, for once, Nate was not to be downed.

"It isn't like that, Kit, and you know it," he protested, firmly. "But—well, come on out, won't you? It's—it's mighty important."

With that, Nate rose and walked toward the door. Presently he opened it and slipped out into the September night.

He had not dared boldly to ask pretty Kit Tremont to walk out there openly with him. He dreaded the chaffing that such a procedure would be sure to bring.

Besides, such a move might have brought out the entire rollicking crowd.

Once out there, Nate peered into the lighted room with a heart that was going fast.

Would Kit come? Or would she treat his request as a

joke, perhaps make it a jest with the other young rollickers?

But presently the door opened. Kit stepped quickly out and closed it again.

"Now, what do you want, Nate?" asked the girl, looking at him straight in the eyes.

Nate's courage all but forsook him, but he braced up.

"Kit," he asked, desperately, "do you think you could ever like me?"

"Why, I like you now," admitted the girl, calmly. "At least, I'd like you better, Nate, if you weren't so—well—shiftless. Purposeless. If you had more go and snap to you—like most of the other boys."

"You think I'm stupid, then?" asked Nate, humbly.

"No; not that," said Kit, with friendly frankness. "But you don't seem to think there's much of anything to be done to-day. Look at Fred, now. See what a hustler he is. And there's Billy Bragg—going to business college in the city, after Christmas. Tom Downing has already gone off to work his way through college and be a doctor. Jake Johnson is promised a job on the railroad soon, and Ed Muench starts, in two weeks, to drive the mail-stage. All the young fellows that you've grown up with are planning to do well. What are you going to do, Nate?"

The girl was looking with such searching friendliness into his eyes that Nate, stung to sudden speech, retorted:

"Kit, I'm going to do better'n any of 'em!"

"At what?"

"I'd rather not tell you just yet, Kit," he replied, quietly. "Let me keep it for a secret a little longer, will you?"

"Why, of course, if you want to keep it a secret," Kit replied, glancing at him without suspicion.

She hadn't even an idea of the truth—that Nate didn't know any secret about his future plans.

But now he branched determinedly into the rest that he had to say.

"Kit, you ain't keeping company with any one yet, are you?"

"Why, of course not," Kit smiled back at him. "Why should I?"

"Honest?"

"I don't tell fibs," replied Kit, with a toss of her head.

"Of course you don't," Nate returned, with sudden tact. "Now, for the next point in the business! Kit, will you let me keep company with you?"

"Why, why should I?" laughed Kit. "I don't want a beau yet."

"But I want a sweetheart, Kit!" cried the boy, with almost sullen passion. "That's just what I need to make me succeed. If you'll agree that I can keep company with you for a while—and let other folks see it—I'll show you, then, that there's something in me that'll make a big man of me!"

But Kit only laughed.

"You do that, Nate," she answered, more seriously, "and I'll talk about keeping company with you."

"But won't you take me for a beau, now, Kit?" pleaded

the boy. "You can ship me any time that I don't show up well enough, you know."

"I'll wait until you do show up," laughed Kit, saucily, and turned to go back into the house.

"But, Kit," murmured the boy, catching at one of her hands and holding her by force, "you won't keep company with any one else until you've given me a chance to show what's in me?"

"Not this year, anyway," replied Kit, with laughing seriousness. She knew well enough that she was not yet ready to think of love or lovers.

"That's an honest promise, Kit—that you'll wait and give me a chance to show what's in me?"

"Yes; if you want it," replied Kit, straightforwardly. "Now, let me go!"

"Remember!"

But Kit, without answer, floated back into the house to join the fun-makers.

Nate stayed out on the porch, to see if he couldn't think out some plan of action—some form of a life-plan.

"It's got to be something big and prosperous," he groaned. "I ain't going to let Kit slip by—for Fred Joyce, or any one else. Hullo! Who's that?"

In the dark Nate had just caught sight of a figure flitting around the house, well out of the reach of the rays of light that came through the windows.

"Oh, it's some one of the fellows, up to fun," murmured the boy, and his eager thoughts flew back to Kit.

Did she really mean it? Would she give him a chance to show what was in him? Did she really understand that she had pledged herself to have no other real beau for the present?

"By thunder! I'll cheek it out and see her home to-night!" flashed Nate, fired by sudden ardor.

But that ardor cooled a moment later with an uneasy suspicion that probably Fred Joyce had already arranged to see Kit home.

There was a sound of kicking, or moving, out in the little old barn. But Nate thought nothing of that; for Dolly, his aunt's gray mare out there, often kicked in her stall.

Nate, gazing up at the stars, thought little about the stable noises until he turned, suddenly, to see Dolly coming out of the stable.

Not only that, but saddled and with a strange, well-dressed young man on her back.

A horse-thief! He must be one, since Nate was sure that Aunt Minnie had given no stranger permission to ride her mare away.

Nate didn't call out. He had too much caution for that, for then the stranger would whip up and get away.

Instead, the boy made a straight dash for the driveway gate.

This he closed with a bang, and wheeled around.

Twenty-five feet away the stranger had halted, and was eyeing our young friend.

"Boy," said the stranger, in a cool voice, "I need that gate open."

"You don't need our horse, do you?" flared Nate.

"Yes; very much; but the horse'll come back to you before daylight. Open that gate!"

"I won't!" defied Nate.

With a swift movement the stranger drew a revolver from his hip-pocket and fired.

The bullet struck almost at Nate Fletcher's feet, throwing up the dirt and making the boy quiver with dread.

"You see," smiled the young stranger, coolly, "I'm in earnest about having that gate opened."

"You'll bring a crowd out on top of you now," challenged Nate.

"All the more reason, then, for being quick!"

The stranger rode a few feet nearer; then, with a steady, unflinching hand, held the pistol so that the muzzle covered Nate's heart at a distance of eight feet.

"Open that gate at once, boy, or you won't have time to say your prayers before you're in the next world!"

That settled it. The determined stranger spoke as if he meant business.

"Don't shoot!" begged Nate. "Hold on!"

He swung the gate open.

"Thank you," acknowledged the stranger, riding through at a trot.

Just outside he urged the horse into a gallop, and rider and beast disappeared down the road.

Now the door flew open, and Fred Joyce's voice called out:

"You out there, Nate?"

"Yes," replied the boy, hoarsely.

"What was that shot?"

"There wasn't any."

"We thought we heard one."

"It was me, slamming the gate," lied Nate, on the spur of the moment.

How could he face this crowd—and Kit most of all—and admit that he had held the gate open for a horse-thief to elope with Aunt Min's only horse? He must have time to think the terrible situation over.

"Humph!" said Fred, coming across the lawn, followed by Billy Bragg and two or three other fellows, "it's mighty funny that you slammed the gate when you're holding it wide open!"

"Oh, run along! Chase yourselves, won't you, you fellows?" grumbled Nate. "I want a minute to myself."

Offended by this lack of hospitality, Fred turned short on his heel and led the crowd back into the house.

"What am I to do? What am I to say?" wondered the boy. "I stood like a fool and let that thief go off with Dolly. What a guying I'll get! Oh, I wish I had never been born! Aunt Min will wish the same thing, too! And Kit? She'll look straight past me when she sees me after this!"

It was almost too much misery to be borne.

Nate stood there, leaning wretchedly over the gate from the outside, after he had closed it.

Chirr-rr-rr! chug! He looked up. Somebody who had

prospered well enough to own an automobile was driving the car down the road.

As the keen lights fell across the boy's figure, the solitary man in the car put on the brakes. Then he stopped.

"Boy, have you seen a young man in a gray suit—a tall, smooth-shaven chap in a soft brown cap?"

"Have I?" gulped Nate.

"Yes; talk up, quick!"

"I've seen him," nodded Nate.

"Where?"

"On the back of our horse!"

"He hired it?" demanded the automobilist, eagerly.

"No! Swiped it!"

"And you saw him and didn't stop him?" demanded the stranger, in amazement.

"I was too late to," said Nate, non-committally.

"Which way did he go?"

"Down that way," Nate replied, pointing.

"Boy, you know all the roads about here?"

"Yes; of course."

"Jump in, then! I'll pay you well!"

"Are you after that horse-thief, to catch him?" cried Nate, eagerly.

"Every time!"

Nate was beside the auto at a bound. Grasping a handrail, he pulled himself up beside the driver.

"Where are the nearest sailboats kept, down that way?" cried the automobilist, a big, portly, red-faced man who looked to be close on to fifty years old.

"Ain't many in the water at this time of the year," Nate replied.

"Where's the nearest one?"

"About the only one I know of is an old sloop of Hunter's. That's at Hunter's Point, about two miles and a half from here."

The big man jumped out, extinguishing his lamps.

"It's against the law to go along these roads without a light," ventured Nate.

"Not when you're after criminals!" jeered the big man, springing in again. "Now, is there a shorter cut than the regular road to Hunter's Point?"

"Yes; a side-road that cuts off about half a mile."

"Guide me by the short cut, then. Remember, boy, there's money in this if you serve me well!"

Chirr-rr-rr! They flew over the road through the dark night. At the turn, our young friend pointed out the short cut.

In almost no time, it seemed, they reached the Point—a bleak, lonely place, with only a low pier at which an old, almost useless thirty-foot sloop bumped against the piles.

"Jump out here, boy, and wait a minute," commanded the big man, who then ran the auto down the shore and hid it behind a grove of trees.

Puffing, the big man ran back.

Listening, they heard the still rather distant sound of a horse's hoofs at a slow trot.

"Our man's coming!" whispered the big man, eagerly,

tremulously. "See here, boy, I want you to get down into that sloop. Hide in the cabin. After the boat's under way, well out from shore, you can come out, and pretend that you've been asleep in the cabin. Tom Treadwell won't remember you as the same boy he saw up yonder. Just make believe to help him, and watch your chance to cut some rope that'll make it impossible to sail the boat further. Understand?"

"No," said Nate, dazedly.

"All you have to do is to slip along and disable the boat, somehow, such as cutting a rope. The officers who have the warrant have gone on to another point to get a motor-boat. You make this sloop helpless, and they'll pick you up all right, and catch the thief. Boy, there's a tremendously big reward out for Tom Treadwell. You'll get a slice of it, if you help. Here! This will sharpen your wits! Remember, this is only a small advance payment at that!"

Nate found a hundred-dollar bill spread out in his hand.

"See here, I want to know more about this," he mumbled.

"You don't need to!" gruffed the big man. "You know what you're to do, and you'll make a big pile out of this if you do it right. Get down into that sloop, quick!"

"Not until I know more about this game," protested the boy.

The trotting horse was coming nearer in the dark.

"It'll never do for Tom Treadwell to catch me here!" grunted the big man, half to himself.

Then, his face distorted by anger, the big man, his voice trembling, growled out:

"Confound you! You know what to do, and you've got to do it! It's the chance of your kid-life to make money! There!"

Whumpf! Getting behind Nate, the big fellow delivered a tremendous kick that sent the boy flying down from the pier into the cock-pit of the sloop.

"Now, stay there, and do your work!" called down the big man, gruffly.

Nate heard the big man's retreating steps. A moment or two later he heard a horse's trot end at the pier.

Then, recovering his wits, our young friend crawled swiftly into the sloop's dark cabin.

CHAPTER II.

AFLOAT WITH DEATH!

Hiding there in the dark, Nate heard that same young man's voice call blithely:

"Go back to your home, good old brute! You'll know enough to go straight back to the poor people who own you, I know!"

Slap! Nate heard the sound of a strong young hand descending on the gray mare's hide. Then the young listener heard Dolly trotting away from the pier.

"Why," glowed Nate, "that fellow's no horse-thief!"

"Nobody in sight, and all dark at the nearest house," mused the young stranger. "It couldn't be better. Now, I hope this old tub of a sloop is seaworthy!"

Bump! Nate heard the young stranger's feet land in the sloop's cock-pit.

At this juncture, young Fletcher remembered the crisp bit of paper that still lay crumpled in his hand. He tucked it cautiously away in an inside pocket. But presently he forgot about even that amazing hundred-dollar bill in his interest in what was taking place about the boat.

The young man, whom the portly driver of the automobile had called Tom Treadwell, was humming as contentedly as if at peace with all the world.

Yet he moved quickly, as the sounds of making sail told.

"This fellow is at home on a sailboat," Nate mused.

At last our young friend heard the casting-off of the bow and stern lines.

Then the boat keeled, began to move through the water.

"I wonder if that fat old party expected me to go out there and face a revolver in a desperate man's hands, just for the fun of the thing?" wondered Nate, crouching in the darkness of the little cabin.

They were sailing straight out to sea, as Nate could tell by the position of the headland, as seen through the cabin-door over the boat's stern.

As Fletcher's eyes grew more accustomed to the dark, he could make out the young man rather plainly.

Yes, it was certainly the same who had so resolutely "borrowed" Dolly a few minutes before.

Now, the headlands quickly vanished in the darkness of the night. The sky was lowery, as if a storm might be expected.

For perhaps a mile off coast they went. Then Nate was just able to make out that the young stranger was lashing the tiller.

"What's up now, I wonder?" quivered Nate, curiously.

He was not long left in doubt.

With a quick step the young stranger leaned over the cabin-door, pulling a long, black tube from his pocket.

Flare! Nate, crouching as he was, was revealed in the glow of a pocket searchlight.

If Fletcher was startled, he was not less so than the stranger.

That young man fell back, letting the light go out as he rested a hand on the tiller.

"Whoever you are," he commanded, "come out!"

"I might as well," mumbled Nate to himself. "He's too mighty handy with that revolver."

So the boy stepped slowly out on to the deck, the stranger regarding him curiously.

The stare was now returned in all coolness.

"If it didn't seem impossible," began the stranger, "I'd say you were the same youngster who so courteously loaned me a horse."

"If you put it that way," grimaced Nate, "I am."

"Then how on earth did you get here?" blurted the stranger.

But Nate, having come to the test, was developing innate courage.

If there was a fortune to be had by capturing this good-looking young criminal, he meant to have it.

So Nate did not answer until he had humped up, seating himself over the hatchway, his legs dangling. Then, looking the stranger straight in the eyes, he demanded:

"Your name's Tom Treadwell, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied the other, with surprising candor.

"You're escaping from the officers, aren't you?" Nate persisted.

Treadwell started, paled, then looked at Nate with angry, suspicious, steely eyes.

His eyes, in that moment, were not pleasant to look at. They were the eyes of the hunted beast who would kill its too-daring pursuer.

"Young man," queried Treadwell, softly, yet in a businesslike tone, "do you realize that you're afloat with death?"

"You mean this unseaworthy old tub?" queried Nate, bluffing, with a smile.

"I mean danger that may come from me," replied Treadwell, firmly. "I mean that danger—death—will come upon you at my hand if you interfere in any way with my plans to-night!"

That was definite, positive—not to be gotten over.

And Tom Treadwell looked like a man who would do all he said when it came to the pinch.

"What do they want you for?" asked Nate, trying to gain time.

"That isn't any of your business," replied Treadwell, coldly. "All you've got to remember is that, now you're on this boat, you've got to keep mighty quiet and not try to hinder me in any way."

"What are you trying to do?"

"How did you learn my name—that officers were after me?" Treadwell counter-questioned. "How did you come to get down here, in fact?"

"It's your turn to answer questions first," proposed Nate, boldly.

A swift flash in Tom Treadwell's resolute eyes warned the boy that he was going too far.

"You answer every one of my questions now," directed the young stranger, "or I'll throw you overboard without a second's hesitation. Understand?"

"Yes."

"You believe I always mean what I say, don't you?"

"Yes," Nate felt forced to admit.

"Then tell me just how you came to be aboard."

"Here goes, then," replied Nate, trying to pretend a coolness that he did not feel, with those angry, steely, watchful eyes on him.

He told the whole story of his meeting with the portly man—all except the passing of the hundred-dollar bill.

"Describe that man more fully," ordered Tom Treadwell.

Nate did so. Treadwell's eyes lighted up with a new light of hate.

"Ohó!" he growled, showing his fine, big, white teeth.

"Boy, do you know why that fellow didn't wait to catch me himself?"

"No; of course not."

"He feared for his miserable life!" hissed the young stranger, sharply. "What's your name, boy?"

"Nate Fletcher."

"Nate, if you ever meet that fellow again, give him a wide berth. Don't trust his offers of reward, or anything else. He's a liar, a scoundrel, a cheat! He's the biggest villain that ever escaped hanging!"

Treadwell was silent for a moment after that, but his breath came sharply. At length he went on:

"Nate, I've been studying your face as well as I could in this darkness. I rather like your face, on the whole. I'm going to tell you something about how I happen to be in this fix. In an hour or two I'll either be safe, or else I'll be dead—shot through and through. So it can do no harm to talk to you. It'll ease my mind to have some one to talk to. Do you care to listen?"

"Why, of course I do," cried Nate, eagerly.

"Then I'm going to tell you. But, speaking of the possibility of my being killed, I may want you to send a note for me. I know you'd do that, all right, so I won't even trouble to ask you. Got paper and pencil with you?"

Nate nodded, producing the articles.

"Write down this address: Miss Nancy Graylock, 234 Ellis Avenue, Cincinnati. Now, Fletcher, I'm going to tell you something about this affair. If I do happen to be killed to-night—for I won't be caught—you will be able to write Nance—Miss Graylock—understandingly. At the same time, if we are overhauled, and there's a fight, you can note something else to tell Miss Graylock. Impress upon her that I died without blood-guilt. I shall fire at the officers, if they get near enough, but I shall shoot past them, and only close enough to provoke them into killing me."

Nate gazed at the young man, fascinated by his quite, but terrible, earnestness.

"By the way," smiled Treadwell, "if the fight begins, you'll naturally want to keep out of the reach of bullets. Shin up the mast as high as you can get."

"I'll wait until the fight begins," Nate smiled back at him.

"Perhaps you've guessed, already, that I'm from Cincinnati," went on the young stranger. "So is Jasper Gregg. He's one of the very rich men of the place. We were both of us suitors for Miss Graylock's hand. I won. I didn't know what a scoundrel Gregg was."

"My father had just failed and died, leaving me very near to being penniless. Gregg tried to show his good-will by organizing a stock company to operate a factory that Gregg had owned. He allowed me to buy five shares, and sold one to a clerk, keeping the rest of the shares for himself. That enabled us to organize as a stock company."

"You see, Gregg owned about everything in the company. But he made me manager and treasurer, and prom-

ised me a good thing when the business grew. How was I to know that he meant something different.

"One day Gregg came to me. We had a lot of the company's money lying idle, not yet invested. Gregg said he wanted a hundred thousand dollars of it. You understand, Nate, that, since he owned almost all of the company, it was his own money. Gregg explained to me that he didn't want any entry on the books to show that he had drawn money at such a time. Then he showed me how to make cross-entries on the books in such a way as not to show that the money had been drawn. So I made the entries as he told me to, got the money and handed it over to him.

"Nate, I don't know whether you'll understand how big a scoundrel a fellow like Gregg can be. Soon after, he had an expert accountant at the books, the cross-entries were discovered, and Gregg denied that he had ever ordered me to do anything of the sort.

"Do you understand, youngster? Though an honest man, I had been tricked into appearing as a defaulter to the tune of a hundred thousand dollars?

"Then the lawyers got after me! Then Jasper Gregg, through another person—he didn't dare to see me himself—gave me to understand that the whole row would be hushed up if I would give up Nance Graylock and help Gregg to win her."

"The scoundrel!" broke, indignantly, from Nate. "He ought to be hanged!"

Tom Treadwell smiled drearily.

"I'm glad to see that you understand, Nate! Well, after that, the only thing to do was to skip, and skip fast. There was even no chance to see Nance. But I got a message from the dear girl! She trusts me, and will wait and stick to me through thick and thin!"

"But how can you get away now?" asked Nate, dubiously.

"Easily enough, if my luck doesn't fail. Though I'm about strapped, Nate, I have friends who are not. One of them owns a steam yacht. He is cruising somewhere around here now. Through the night he'll pass this part of the coast. It only rests with me to get aboard. Then off for some foreign shore until this trouble blows over! My friends will fight for me, if once I can be gotten safe away from prison bars and bolts."

"Listen!" urged Nate, suddenly, holding up a hand.

Away to the south of them could be heard a steady chug-chugging.

"A motor-boat!" thrilled Nate. "Is that the one the officers are in—after you?"

"Must be!" cried Tom, desperately. "And, if Gregg has had chance to communicate with the officers, he'll tell them just where I put off."

"How do the officers come to be so close on your trail?" asked Nate, with awe in his voice at the thought of how soon a fatal tragedy might occur.

"The Lord only knows how detectives get after people!" cried Treadwell, bitterly. "But they do. I was hiding in this section of the country for the last twenty-four hours, waiting until to-night. To-night I saw many men pass my

hiding-place on foot. Of course I suspected them all of being officers. I felt that I must be mounted, so that I could beat pursuit. That was why I borrowed your horse."

"Listen!" urged Nate. "That launch is getting closer!"

"Boy!" cried Treadwell, with sudden suspicion, "you're not going to go back on me, are you?"

"What's that?" Nate demanded, sharply. "Do you class me with scoundrels like Gregg?"

"But that reward——"

"Blood money!" spoke Nate Fletcher, contempt ringing honestly in his young voice.

"You'll stand by me, old chap?" cried Treadwell, sudden joy in his voice as he gazed peeringly into Nate's eyes.

"Why, of course I will! Stand by an honest man in trouble every time!"

Their hands met in fervent clasp.

"Fletcher, I don't understand how you trust me, with only my own word back of me?"

"I trust you the same way you trusted me," smiled Nate. "You said you believed in my looks. I believe in yours. There! That launch is still getting closer! Wouldn't it be wise to shape off a bit more to the northeast?"

"Correct," nodded Treadwell, throwing over the wheel. "Nate, can you sail a boat like this?"

"Of course. Any fellow in our town could."

"You'll be able to take her back to shore, then?"

"Sure enough!"

Treadwell relapsed into silence. Both listened to that chug-chugging.

"Those chaps in the launch seem to be going more inshore," Nate whispered.

Treadwell nodded.

"Now, they're putting out a bit, but southeast," whispered Nate, a few moments later.

"I wonder how far away they can see a white sail like ours," murmured the fugitive, glancing at the canvas.

Nate glanced up at the thick, black sky.

"In weather like this," he replied, "I doubt if our sail can be seen much more than an eighth of a mile away."

"How fast are we sailing, Nate?"

"About seven knots on this tack."

"How fast does the average launch around here go?"

"From eight to ten knots—perhaps eleven, with crowding."

Treadwell shrugged his shoulders.

"Our only hope of safety lies in not being seen," he observed, grimly.

Once, later, they heard the chug-chugging come so close that it seemed as if the launch, still invisible in the blackness, must soon come out of the unseen and run them down.

They changed their course slightly, holding their breaths, until the chugging receded.

"Scares like that grow gray hairs over night!" muttered Tom Treadwell, bitterly.

They lay to, now, Nate having declared that they were just about three miles off shore.

Our hero went forward, to keep a sharp lookout, Treadwell remaining astern.

"Hey!" warned Nate, softly, at last. "There's something moving off there!"

Treadwell ran lightly forward.

"My good old friend's yacht, I do believe!" he cried, joyously.

"A steam yacht making no noise?" murmured Nate.

"Be sure the engines are not moving," retorted Treadwell. "That craft is only under sail now, but with the engines ready to start in a second. By Jove! Nate, indistinct as that mass is, it must be the yacht!"

"She looks to be a quarter of a mile away," breathed young Fletcher.

"I'll chance it! I'll run alongside."

"Listen!" urged Nate.

"What for?"

"What's the course of that launch with the officers aboard?"

As best they could, they located the position of the police launch in the dark.

"Quite a bit to south," whispered Treadwell. "We'll chance it!"

Running back to the helm, the fugitive hauled in his sheet. The sloop began to move, Nate remaining at the bow for lookout.

Within a few minutes they ran so close to the big craft that Nate made out, with fair distinctness, a steam-yacht, schooner-rigged, of some three hundred and fifty tons.

Tom Treadwell, trembling as if with ague, rose in the cock-pit. Making a trumpet of his hands, he bellowed:

"Bonita, ahoy!"

"Hullo, there!" came back the answer, through a megaphone. "Who's that?"

"Tom!"

"Thank heaven, old chap!"

"I'm coming alongside."

"Make it as quick as you can!"

But Nate, pointing to the southward, called softly to the fugitive:

"There's that infernal launch—headed straight this way!"

CHAPTER III

LOST!

"Let me take the helm!" cried Nate, leaping aft. "You get forward, and get aboard as fast as you can. Then I'll sail off and try to get the police boat on a false chase."

"God bless you, old chap!" cried Tom Treadwell, huskily.

He gave up the helm, gave Nate's nearest shoulder a squeeze, then ran forward to the bow.

In his best style of seamanship Nate Fletcher ran the old sloop up to the windward of the big steam yacht.

Graze! He ran the sloop just lightly alongside, that Tom Treadwell might safely leap up to the rail of the larger craft.

"Good-bye, and good luck!" hailed Nate, just loudly enough to be heard.

But the fugitive, wheeling swiftly about, after grasping the hand of a man who had met him at the rail, cried:

"Phil, don't let that brick of a boy get away until you've been down on his deck and wrung his hand for his kindness to me."

"What did he do for you?" asked the man addressed.

"That boy, Nate Fletcher, was sent to help catch me, and dazzled with offers of big reward. Instead, he has helped me to get out here. I owe all my safety to him!"

"Thunder! Is that so?" bellowed the man addressed as Phil. "Nate Fletcher, wait just a second until I get an important message for you to take ashore!"

With that, the man named Phil, who must be the owner of this handsome yacht, disappeared through a doorway in the deck-house.

But he was out again, almost instantly, with a small package in his hands.

Down on the deck of the old sloop he plumped himself, then darted aft.

He was a short man, as rounded and plump as Cupid himself, and with one of the jolliest faces Nate had ever seen.

"My boy, God bless you!" cried Phil, grasping Fletcher's hand. "You don't know what you've done for a lot of folks in helping dear old Tom Treadwell to get away from Gregg! Remember, Tom has friends! We'd have bought his way out of this fool scrape, but Gregg simply wouldn't have it—the unhung villain! Take this box, Nate! It's yours! Guard it carefully! Good-bye!"

"We'll show you what we can do!" laughed Phil, joyously, as he ran forward. "Captain, full steam—due east!"

By the time that the command was out of his mouth, this jolly little man in the blue yachting-suit had climbed back to the deck of his own craft.

"Sheer off, quick!" called Tom, waving his hand. "God bless you, Nate! Write, in the morning, to that address I gave you!"

"I will! Good-bye, and good luck, Tom Treadwell!"

A deep-throated, challenging blast came from the whistle of the yacht. All of a sudden, lights shone through the windows of the Bonita's deck-houses.

The green and red sidelights beamed out; a masthead light glistened high up in the forward rigging.

One bell! The Bonita began to move and to turn, as Nate filled and fell off.

Two bells! With a series of short, barking blasts from her whistle, the Bonita scurried away at a fifteen-knot clip, a blazing mass of glaring light on the water.

"She's just scooting off like some grand old pirate!" throbbed Nate Fletcher as, with hand on wheel, he watched her go for a minute.

Then, recalling himself, he sent the sloop's head around, starting back toward Hunter's Point.

"I don't hear the launch now," muttered the boy, listening. "I'll bet she's racing with the swift Bonita."

Which was just what the launch was doing, and hopelessly.

Now, Nate suddenly remembered the little wooden box, given him by Phil, and on which our hero was now sitting.

Easing off the sheet, Nate stepped below. There was a bracket lamp at the further end of the cabin. He lighted it; then turned to the box, pushing out the sliding-lid.

"It's raining money to-night!" he gasped.

There, in the box, lay banknotes—some of them old and worn. There were fives, tens and twenties—and ones!

All this Nate's eyes discovered as his trembling fingers ran over the ends of the pile.

On top of all lay a card. One side bore on it the engraved name, "Philip Bentley."

On the other side was written:

"This would have been more, but cleans up about all the ready cash I have on hand!"

"More?" vibrated Nate, his face flushing hotly. "Great Scott! it's enough—if ever there was enough of anything. Whew! What a lot! How much, I wonder?"

Feverishly he ran over the ends of the banknotes, hastily adding the figures together.

"Five hundred and ten dollars!" he throbbed. "I should say Tom Treadwell did have friends—and they're princes at that!"

In an ecstasy this boy, who had never owned a five-dollar bill before, remembered and drew out the bill which Gregg had pressed into his hand.

"I didn't do anything to earn that hundred, though," he mused. "I suppose I'll have to give it back to Gregg if I can find him. By thunder, though! He ought to owe me that much for the fearful kick he gave me. But, say, wasn't Aunt Min right, though? She said I'd have to be kicked into luck before I could make anything out of life."

A whining of wind in the sloop's halyards, and a lurching rocking of the old hull told weather-wise Nate Fletcher that it was time to get out on deck.

He placed Gregg's money with that which Bentley had given him, thrusting it under a mattress in one of the bunks.

Then Nate bounded out on deck.

It was high time:

Just as he hauled the sheet in, a puff of wind caught the sail, burying the sloop's lee rail under water.

Just in the nick of time Nate let go the sheet.

Glancing astern, he saw a great, black wind-cloud blowing in toward him.

"It's time for scant sail," he panted, scrambling forward. Down fluttered the great mainsail.

"Shall I put a reef in the jib?" wondered Nate. "No; I'll chance it!"

Clambering back, he played out the jib-sheet a bit, after feeling the first few tugs of the wind at it.

"Wonder where the chug-chug boat is?" he smiled, to himself. "I haven't heard it lately."

The sloop was behaving better, now, under her scant al-

lowance of spread. Nate, used to the coast all his life, felt no concern about making a safe berthing.

"Over six hundred dollars!" he told himself, again and again. "My! Don't that make Fred Joyce's team of horses look sick! Why, I can buy *three* teams if I want!"

But Nate, with money, found himself more undecided about the future than he had ever been when there was no money in sight.

Yet, in this moment of prosperity, some good sense dawned on him. He would allow himself twenty dollars for pleasure—not a cent more! The rest must go into business of some kind. This is my chance for a future—and Kit!"

The future, he decided, could wait until he had had a good sleep, and then a good talk with Aunt Min. How astounded she would be!

But that twenty for pleasure! What a wide world of chances the spend of twenty whole dollars opened to him.

"A shotgun?" he wondered. "No-o-o-o; I s'pose not. A good one would eat up the whole twenty. A bicycle? That's just as bad!"

Then his mind turned on a lump of small things, each one of which could be bought for a few dollars.

Nate was piling them up before his mind's eye, when—

Bump! The sloop, sailing fast before that half-gale, had crashed against something under her bow.

Tear! That something ripped plank after plank out of the bottom of the craft as she forced on to the rocks.

Then a high wave lifted the sloop clear of the rocks, forged her ahead, and swiftly down out of sight.

Startled Nate had just time to jump astern and clear himself of the craft before she went to her doom.

Once in the water, Nate swam as a matter of course. One of his feet struck something hard and rocklike.

Nate let down both feet, standing erect on a reef whose top was below the white-capped water.

"I forgot the Sow's Back ledge!" chattered the boy. "Hang it! I was thinking so much about that money—and now!"

His despairing eyes saw the sloop stagger on and sink in water deeper than any diver could go down in.

"The money's done for—my only chance gone!" he half-sobbed, as he fought to keep his footing on that narrow reef that had wrecked his fortunes.

Just because he was young, Nate fought to keep his footing—struggled to keep alive, where an older man, as discouraged, might have given up the battle then and there.

A dozen times through the night Nate Fletcher was swept from his unstable footing.

A dozen times he regained the Sow's Back ledge.

The breaking of morning came as dark and gloomy as Nate's own feelings.

He had kept his footing all through the night, though often had he been near to perishing.

The sky was black. It was beginning to rain hard, with flashes of lightning and distant rumblings of thunder.

Nate, sweeping the horizon in all directions, saw a sloop to the northward. It was a mile away, but coming nearer.

"They may see my signal," he thought, listlessly, pulling off his jacket and waving it.

And at last "they" did see. The small cruising sloop, with a rowboat in tow, bore down close to the reef.

Then two young fellows, after waving friendly hands, piled into the small boat, leaving a third young fellow aboard the sloop.

"Ahoy, there!" called out one of the rowers. "Safe to come right up alongside of you?"

"Yes," Nate answered, listlessly. "In a light-draft craft like yours."

In a moment the rowboat was alongside.

"Your life is safe now!" cheered the stranger, reaching out a strong arm to the boy on the sunken reef.

"My life?" chattered Nate, as they pulled him into the boat. "I've lost more than that—lost everything that I had to make life at all worth living!"

CHAPTER IV.

CRUSERS UP TO DATE.

"How on earth did you ever come to be out on that bit of sunken reef, anyway?" curiously asked the leader of this cruising trio when the yacht was under way again.

"Of course I'm awfully obliged to you fellows for pulling me off that reef, but please don't ask me any questions. My head don't feel straight enough for talking," protested Nate, miserably.

The three young cruisers exchanged meaning looks. They believed that their unexpected passenger was out of his head.

"Where do you want to be put ashore?" asked the leader.

"At that beach over there, if it's all the same to you, please," requested Nate, pointing to a strip of beach some two miles below Hunter's Point.

"All places look alike to us," cried the leader of the cruisers, cheerily.

Nate sat looking gloomily out over the water. He could not help hearing the chatter of his companions, though, and gathered from what they said that they were on a pleasure cruise down the coast.

But suddenly Nate started, stood bolt upright, gasped and pointed; then broke forth, hoarsely:

"There it is!"

He pointed in intense excitement at a very small wooden box floating on the waves, perhaps a hundred feet off the weather rail.

"Get it!" he pleaded, hoarsely.

"What is it?" asked the leader of these youngsters.

"It's—it's my tackle-box—and has valuable papers in it," returned Nate, blindly, desperately. "Oh, get it, please!"

Again the three cruising youngsters exchanged meaning looks. Clearly, their strange passenger was "off his head."

But the chap at the helm put obligingly about, sailing

up so close to the box that Nate Fletcher, leaning feverishly over the lee rail, scooped the floating box in.

"Excuse me, won't you?" he choked, and darted down into the cabin.

There, with no prying eyes but his own, he slipped the lid of the box.

Yes! There it was—all the money—none the worse, except for being well water-soaked.

That mattress in the bunk must have floated—the box with it. On the waves they had parted company.

But Nate had his money! That changed the whole universe again!

He staggered up on to the deck—a wild light of joy in his eyes.

If the cruising youngsters had thought him "dotty" before, they were sure of it now.

Nate was still silent, though trembling. The first words he said were those of thanks when the cruising youngsters put him ashore at the point where he had asked to be landed.

Still clutching the precious box, which he would not trust even to a pocket, our hero hurried home.

It was so early in the morning that he met no one on the way.

But Aunt Min was up. She yanked the door open with a bang.

"Nate Fletcher! You good-for-nothing!" she shrieked. "What have you been up to? A nice one you are—to leave your young guests and go rantling off on Dolly! And that mare coming home under an empty saddle and scaring me more'n half to death! What do you mean by it? And what do you s'pose your last night's company'll be saying. Where have you been, and what have you been doing? You half-crazy, shiftless, strange boy! What do you mean by it all? What——"

"When you get through, Aunt Min," laughed Nate, happily, "perhaps I can tell you. But now I want some breakfast, as soon as I can get dry clothes on. And while I'm eating I'll tell you some of my plans for going ahead and doing things in life!"

That struck good old Aunt Minnie dumb. It aroused all her curiosity, too.

But not until Nate had on dry clothes, and was half-way through a steaming hot breakfast of meat, potatoes and coffee, would he open his batteries.

Then he told Aunt Minnie all, and opened up his wonderful little wooden box, to prove what he said.

Aunt Minnie, very near to collapse from sheer amazement, decided that they would hitch Dolly at once, and get all that money to the bank, where it would be safe.

"Not quite so fast, Aunt Min," begged the boy.

Then he talked for another half hour. He had a plan in life, at last. And Aunt Min, who had all of a mother's softness toward that nephew of hers, agreed, at last, to let him have his own way.

"Maybe, likely, that boy ain't as big a fool as every one seems to think," she murmured to herself, with a thrill, half of pride and half of uneasiness, as Nate again hurried

upstairs—this time to carefully hide all but a few dollars of his wealth.

The very next thing that Nate did was to write a long letter to Miss Nance Graylock, as he had promised Tom Treadwell to do.

That letter mailed, Nate bought stationery, stamps and a daily newspaper, and hurried home.

He wrote many more letters that day. They were short ones, but they did the trick.

Within the next fortnight Nate Fletcher had all Dreamhaven—except Aunt Minnie—on the guessing-list.

There were strange stories going about.

Nate Fletcher, on a few dollars, had made a very small investment in Wall Street. It had paid, and, with the money, he had gone into other ventures, in a small way.

He was still making money, but making it faster now, and in larger chunks.

There were some who sniffed at such stories—yet how could they doubt?

For, in the first place, Nate looked prosperous. He was the owner of two of the “dandiest” suits of clothes to be seen on any young fellow in Dreamhaven.

Besides, didn’t he get letters, lots of ‘em, every day, from people who used envelopes that bore the addresses of brokers in New York City?

And couldn’t Nate himself be seen, any forenoon, going to the postoffice with at least a half-dozen letters addressed to New York brokers?

And so every one had to believe that Nate Fletcher was “making money fast.”

As for Nate, he had nothing to say. He kept a smiling face as his sole answer to questioners.

Nevertheless, he had seen to it that such stories were started on the rounds.

It was all part of Nate’s plan to account for his having so much money as he intended presently to use.

It doesn’t take much to get letters from brokers. If one writes, asking advice about investments, to the brokers who advertise in newspapers, he is sure to get replies from those brokers.

And that was all Nate was doing—asking questions of brokers, but investing never a copper! His letters of inquiry brought brokers’ replies and set the postoffice people to talking for Nate in that little town.

Fred Joyce, the shrewd, saving, hustling young fellow, didn’t talk much about his team of horses in these October days. He couldn’t find anybody interested in his small business venture. Everybody was marveling at Nate—who was growing locally famous on pure bluff!

“Say, Nate, give us a tip!” urged Fred Joyce, meeting our hero, one day, on Main Street. “I’ve got eleven dollars.”

“What do you want to do with it?” smiled Nate.

“Why, I thought, maybe, you’d be willing to give me a hint on what I could do with it by sending it to some broker in Wall Street,” stammered Fred.

“Wall Street?” echoed Nate, with a look of surprise.

“Well, everybody says you’re making a heap of money there.”

“You’ll be rich, one of these days, if you believe all you hear,” smiled Nate.

But still the Wall Street rumors persisted. Had anybody been smart enough to trace these rumors down to their source, they would have found that the most startling rumors came from Will Slater, who was a sort of chum of Nate’s.

Will understood what he was to do. He and Nate had talked that over.

Once in a while Nate stole off to his room to read over again the long, grateful letter he had received from Miss Nance Graylock, and to look at the portrait of herself that that young lady had sent him.

But, mostly, in his spare time, Nate kept about the streets, looking for a chance meeting with Kit Tremont.

That young lady, sharing the general curiosity in Dreamhaven, took a good deal of interest in young Fletcher these days.

It was not long before Nate began to look about for a business to buy—and then Dreamhaven got at the fever-heat of its curiosity!

But Nate found one fault, or another, with any business in town that was offered to him.

But, at last, Old Sam Gardner’s mill came into the market. It was a combination grist and saw-mill, with a very fair average of business always.

A fair price for the property would have been four thousand dollars.

But Mr. Gardner, who had saved some money, had been advised by his doctor to spend his winters South after this.

So he put up the mill at three thousand dollars, spot cash, in order to make a quick sale.

Then Nate scurried around. He found that the bank would lend twenty-five hundred on so good a property.

Nate put five hundred of his own funds with the bank money, and swiftly bought the mill, Aunt Minnie acting as his guardian and signing the mortgage papers at the bank.

Just after the deal was closed Nate ran into Fred Joyce on the street.

“I reckon I’ll see a good deal of you this winter, Fred,” smiled Nate.

“Why so?” asked Joyce, curiously.

“You haul logs to Gardner’s mill this winter, don’t you?”

“Yes; you going to work there?” asked Fred.

“Probably. I’ve just bought the mill.”

“What!”

The news spread like wild-fire. Dreamhaven gave another big gasp. The local newspaper wrote Fletcher up as “our youngest business man.”

Right after that Nate, who had learned that Hunter had tried to sell his sloop for fifty dollars sent him that amount in an unsigned letter.

“That squares my conscience for losing his boat,” uttered Nate to his aunt.

The morning after the purchase of the mill Nate went down to have a look at it.

The mill ran usually by water-power, but there was a gasoline engine for use when the water was low.

For the past two weeks it had been closed, but the beginning of the grinding season was at hand.

"It's going to take some mighty hard mucking and sawing to ever get the mortgage paid off on that place," sighed Nate, as he drew near to his property. "But I never had much of anything, anyway, so it won't seem hard to do without things until I get the old mill all paid off."

He went through the mill, opening doors and windows, to let air and sunlight in.

Toot! toot! There was a sound of wheels down in the wagon-yard below. Nate hurried down, just in time to see a big touring-car slow up at the door.

"Crickets!" gasped the boy, receiving a shock. "It's old Jasper Gregg! Now, what on earth——"

Gregg was coming in through the door by this time.

He took a shrewd look around the mill, then glanced with a jeering smile at our hero.

"Pretty fair place here, Fletcher."

"Yes," Nate responded, wondering what was coming next.

"You're the new owner here, I hear."

"So folks say," Nate assented.

"Must have taken quite a bit of money to get this place."

"Oh, some," Nate admitted.

"And you didn't have any money before a certain night that we both remember."

"What are you driving at, Mr. Gregg?" Nate Fletcher demanded, bluntly.

"I don't believe it'll take me long to explain myself," retorted Jasper Gregg. "You've got a good little property here, where you didn't have any money until very lately. You got that money by helping Tom Treadwell to escape from justice! To help a fugitive escape from justice is a crime—a state prison crime! In this case," thundered Gregg, "it's a crime that I'm particularly interested in, seeing you punished for to the full extent of the law!"

CHAPTER V.

GREGG HAS THE FLOOR.

"Oh," asked Nate, hiding a yawn behind his hand. "Is that all?"

"All?" thundered Gregg. "Isn't it enough?"

"I don't know," Nate smiled. "Any idea how you're going to prove the things you charge?"

"Do you deny that's the way you got the money that you've spent here?"

"I haven't been asked to deny it," Nate smiled, coolly.

"I ask you now? Do you dare deny that you got a lot of money through helping Tom Treadwell to get away from the officers?"

"Oh, fu-u-udge!" yawned Nate. "I don't take any interest in jokes."

Jasper Gregg flushed angrily. He knew that he had no

case against the boy, but had hoped to scare the youngster by a bluff.

For Gregg had a strong notion that he could use Nate Fletcher.

That very idea, in fact, had brought the old schemer back to Dreamhaven.

"You've got the usual smartness of a very fresh youth, Fletcher," cried Gregg, angrily, as he turned toward the door. "But I believe I'll be able to show you that you've gotten yourself head over heels in trouble!"

"Good-bye," said Nate, with mock politeness.

He followed Jasper Gregg to the door, slamming it shut and bolting it as soon as his visitor had stepped over the sill.

Still smiling, Nate watched through a window until Gregg and his automobile were out of sight. Then our hero threw the door open again,

"He must think I was born just before daylight this morning," smiled Fletcher, as he stood looking over his mill-yard.

"Hullo, Nate!" hailed Will Slater, from the mail-stage. "Receiving visitors this morning?"

"Always, when you're the visitor," Nate called back. "Drive in."

"I've got four trunks from the hotel, but I guess they can wait," announced Slater, as he drove up to the door, and reined up.

For half an hour the two youngsters rambled over the mill.

"Jupiter! But there'll be a howl over those blamed trunks up at the hotel!" he cried. "And two of 'em belong to a well-fixed old rooster, who has the best rooms in the place."

"What's his name?" asked Nate, with sudden interest.

"Tell you in an instant," Will returned, bounding out to the wagon. "Gregg!" he called back, after an inspection of the trunks. "And here's another belonging to a chap named Purrman. I heard he was Gregg's lawyer. Now, what can a visitor to a place like Dreamhaven want to bring along a lawyer for?"

But Nate's heart gave a sudden bump.

A lawyer? He believed he could guess why Gregg had brought along a limb of the law.

"Is there any possible way Gregg can make trouble for me?" Nate asked himself, hastily. "Because, if he can, old Gregg will do it! I can see that he hates me worse than poison, for letting Treadwell get out of his clutches!"

"Better come on up to the hotel and play you're helping me take the trunks in," suggested Will. "You can help me face the music, too, if there's any row."

"Wait till I close the mill up," Nate requested.

This done, he climbed up on the stage beside Will.

"Take all three of the trunks up to Mr. Purrman's room—number seventeen," was the hotel clerk's direction.

Nate and Will had just finished carrying the third trunk into room seventeen, which was unoccupied at that time.

This trunk they had stood on end, close to the door that connected seventeen with room fifteen.

Then suddenly Nate caught Will by the sleeve, at the same time making a sign for silence.

For, from the next room, our hero heard the faint sound of voices.

To Will Slater's utter amazement, Nate climbed up on the trunk beside the connecting door.

In another instant Nate was silently at work at the transom.

Stealthily, an inch at a time, down that came, until it was all but wide open.

And now the voices in the next room were distinctly audible to the two youngsters.

"It's your business to bring that boy, Fletcher, into camp, Purrrman," declared the voice of Jasper Gregg. "You're shrewd enough to do it."

"But there's one thing I must know, before I go any further," answered the smooth, oily voice of another man.

"What it is, Purrrman?" questioned Gregg.

"I must have the real inside of that Tom Treadwell business."

"What inside?"

"Did Tom really steal the money?"

"Of course he did."

"Now, my dear Mr. Gregg, I hope you are telling me the strict truth."

"Why should that interest you?" sneered Gregg.

"Because a lawyer, if he is to work for the real best interests of his client, must always know the exact truth."

"Oh!"

"Otherwise, my dear Mr. Gregg, at some critical moment that lawyer, if he does not possess the real, exact truth, is sure to leave some hole uncovered, and his client slips into that hole."

"I don't see why," interposed Gregg, in an uneasy tone.

"It happens, often," spoke Lawyer Purrrman, more firmly. "Gregg, at the easiest, this is a deep game that you want me to play. If you deceive me as to one single point of the truth, I am in danger of failing you, as any other misinformed lawyer would do in my place."

"Then what if I haven't told you the whole truth?" questioned Jasper Gregg.

"I have felt all along that you hadn't told me the full truth. But now you must, Mr. Gregg. You needn't hesitate. I have been your lawyer for a good many years. Have I ever tricked you, or played you false?"

"No, Purrrman, you haven't."

"I won't now, either, Mr. Gregg. Now, for the truth. Did Tom Treadwell really steal that money?"

"No, he didn't," admitted Jasper Gregg.

"What was done, then?"

"At my order he drew the money from bank and turned it over to me."

"And you used it?" pursued the lawyer.

"Yes."

"Tom Treadwell got none of it?"

"Not a penny of it," laughed Gregg, harshly.

"But as to the books?"

"Tom Treadwell fixed the books up as I suggested."

"And then, when you put an expert accountant on the books, the accountant found evidence that would easily put Treadwell behind the bars?"

"That's the case," Gregg admitted.

"Jasper Gregg," came admiringly, in that smooth, oily voice, "you're a genius! And now, that you've told me the exact truth, I shall know how to go ahead, if Treadwell is ever caught, and put him behind the bars as safely as if he were a sure-enough defaulter!"

"Great heavens!" broke in sudden, startled agony from Jasper Gregg. "Look at that open transom!"

Both lawyer and client made a dash for the door.

They got it open just in time to see two boys disappearing at the top of the staircase.

Yet, in that short instant's glimpse, Jasper Gregg recognized our hero and cursed.

"Say, what on earth is that game all about?" panted Will Slater, as soon as he and his chum found themselves rattling down the street on the stage.

"Will," breathed young Fletcher, tremulously, "will you remember every word that you heard?"

"Sure I will," assented Slater.

"And remember those voices, so that you can swear to them again when you hear 'em?"

"That's easy," nodded Will, cheerfully.

"Then soon—very soon, old fellow—I'll tell you what it's all about. But, now, drive me around to the depot—quick!"

In the little railway station Nate Fletcher, with all his wits at boiling point, concocted a telegram to Miss Nance Graylock.

To one not in the secret, that telegram would have seemed rather stupid.

But Nance Graylock's sharp woman's wit, made sharper still by her anguished love, would understand every word of cheer that the words veiled.

Nance Graylock would at once understand the big chance there was that her Tom Treadwell could once again walk the streets unmolested.

"Now, Will, old fellow, if you haven't got anything else to do, you can drive me home," suggested Nate, limp when he came out from the telegraph office.

Once back at the little farm, and left there by departing Will, Nate didn't go into the house.

He wanted to walk about the place, keeping quiet and doing a heap of thinking.

An hour later a soft, but eager, voice hailed from over the fence:

"Are you Mr. Nathan Fletcher?"

With a start, Nate looked up. On the seat of a buggy, beside a colored driver, Nate saw a tall, slim man of middle age, dressed all in black. The man our hero had never seen before, but the voice he knew.

"Yes; I'm Fletcher," he answered.

The visitor came in hurriedly by the gate, and straight up to our hero.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Nate smilingly inquired:

"How do you do, Mr. Purrman?"

"You know me, then?"

"I'd know that voice wherever I heard it!"

Again Nate was smiling broadly into his annoyed caller's face.

The caller glanced around, to make sure that no one was within hearing. Then he went on, in a low, cautious tone:

"You seem like a very bright young man, Fletcher. I understand that you have been able, already at your age, to go into business."

Nate smiled.

"I am sure that so bright a young man wants to get quickly and surely further along the road to success," purred the lawyer, in his slick, oily tone.

Nate was still smiling.

"Now," continued the lawyer, "we two understand certain things. Do we not?"

Nate's smile was unchanged.

"I would like to have an exact talk with you," purred the visitor, "and show you just how you can greatly add to your chances of success in life."

No word from Nate; only that quiet, provoking smile.

"Well?" complained the caller. "Haven't you a word to say?"

Still that tantalizing smile!

"I see, Fletcher, that I've got to be plain and to the point with you. Well, then, in behalf of my client—you know whom I mean—I am prepared to offer——"

"Oh, Nate!" called Aunt Minnie's shrill voice from the house.

Nate turned, still smiling.

"I'm wanted," he remarked, coolly. "I shall hope to see you again, sir—some time."

"Just one minute!" interrupted Lawyer Purrman, vimfully.

"I'm sorry," Nate smiled. "But my aunt wants me. Good-bye!"

That smile was still on Nate's face when the boy reached the door.

"Well, of all the confounded, cantankerous, unmanageable, fool boys!" growled Purrman, savagely, under his breath. "He turns me down—that little country bumpkin! Turns me down as some one he doesn't care to deal with. Oho, my boy! You need some real taming! And I reckon Henry C. Purrman is the experienced man who can do that taming! We shall see!"

CHAPTER VI.

STRIKING THE SOUL A BLOW.

"Good evening, Nate!"

"Good evening, Kit!"

The two had met just outside the postoffice, in the little crowd that always came for the evening mail.

Kit blushed a little under Nate's strong, ardent gaze. There was something in his eyes to-night that she hadn't seen there since that night on the porch when he had made his nervous appeal.

"I want to speak with you just a minute, Kit," Nate went on, with a low voice. "You can spare me the time, can't you?"

Kit blushed again; next answered, demurely:

"I suppose so."

Nate stepped at her side as they moved off down the sidewalk, stopping just out of earshot of every one else.

"Do you remember, Kit, what you agreed to one night not very long ago?" Nate asked, with the energy that had become strongly marked in this awakened boy of late.

"What?" asked Kit, as if fencing for time.

"You said that when I showed signs of a real plan of succeeding in life, you'd tell me, yes or no, whether I could keep company with you."

"Yes," nodded Kit, honestly, as she looked down at the ground, "I did."

The curious, who always watched Nate of late, were watching both young people now.

"Guess Nate's going to win out there," ventured one young fellow to Fred Joyce.

"Humph!" was all Fred said.

Older people, as well, were eyeing the young pair who stood there, just out of earshot.

"Well, Kit, I've shown you my start in life, haven't I?" demanded Nate. "I've got control of the mill, and I'm going to run it."

"I hope you'll do real well at the business, Nate," cried Kit, earnestly.

"See here, dear girl, that isn't the answer," retorted Nate, with pretended sternness. "Am I going to keep company with you, from now on, or not? Surely, you're ready with your answer now!"

Again Kit's eyes sought the ground. Then she looked up, about to speak, when the dark, sharply-defined figure of a stranger moved toward them.

"Nathan Fletcher?" inquired this stranger.

"Yes," Nate replied, crossly.

This wasn't the time to be interrupted by a fellow you didn't even know.

"Nathan Fletcher," continued the stranger, solemnly, "you're my prisoner."

Now, Nate's face shot deathly white.

"Prisoner?" he demanded, stepping back.

"P-p-prisoner?" faltered Kit, looking as if she would either burst into tears or run away.

"What nonsense are you talking?" flared the boy, hotly.

"Sorry that it isn't nonsense," replied the stranger, laying a hand on one of Nate's shoulders.

Fletcher shook that hand off angrily.

"Don't resist," urged the stranger, coolly, while Kit looked on with horror in her eyes, and the crowd jammed around the little group.

"What's the charge, and who are you?" demanded Nate, briskly.

"A deputy-sheriff of the county," replied the stranger, unconcernedly. "And the charge is that you committed a felony—a prison offence—in aiding in the escape from justice of an accused defaulter, to wit, one Thomas Treadwell."

"Oh," replied Nate, his face still white and set, but a curious smile appearing there. "So that's the charge, is it?"

"It's charge enough," replied the deputy.

Then, turning to the crowd, that officer added:

"A fine young hustler, this! He aids a fugitive criminal to escape from justice, and gets the price for his crooked work. Then he sets up as a rich young man, or, at least, as a money-making hustler. Now, friends, you know just how Nathan Fletcher brought about his sudden prosperity. Were any of you young folks at Fletcher's party a few weeks ago?"

"Yes," nodded Fred Joyce, and Kit Tremont shot an angry look at him.

"You may remember," hinted the deputy-sheriff, "that Fletcher left his party, and didn't show up again that night."

"Yes; that's right," murmured Fred, looking around at the crowd.

"That night," sneered the deputy, "young Fletcher disappeared, in order to help a defaulter get away from the officers. I was one of those officers, so I know. When Fletcher left the party, he went out to meet that fugitive, Thomas Treadwell."

"That isn't so—not true—not a word of it!" broke in Kit, defiantly. "I know why Nate quit the party that night, and I'm going to tell. He took me out on the porch to ask me if he might keep company with me!"

"Oh, he did, did he?" jeered the deputy.

"I wouldn't give him an answer then," Kit went on, proudly, "and he went away from the party because he felt badly. He asked me again to-night—and I've said 'yes.'"

Nate flushed, all his lost color coming back. His eyes shot a look of joy in Kit's direction.

"And I'm glad I did say 'yes,'" Kit went on, defiantly, looking fearlessly around at the little crowd of her neighbors.

But the deputy, who had been paid to make a scene of this arrest, feared that Kit would turn sentiment the other way.

So he growled out:

"Wish you joy of your sweetheart, miss! Now, come along, Fletcher!"

"I will when you show your badge," retorted our hero, holding back.

The deputy had a badge, and displayed it.

"Don't worry about me, neighbors," spoke Nate, coolly. "Good-night, now, but I'll see you all to-morrow."

"Yes—in court," sneered the deputy, as he led the boy away.

After the boy and his captor came a friendly chorus of: "Good-night, Nate!"

It was followed by a cheer.

Down to the station-house Nate was marched, and turned over to the constable. The deputy now had no more to do with the matter.

"You don't have to lock me in a cell just yet, do you?" our hero asked of Constable Jimpson.

"Not so long, Nate, as I'm sure you won't try to get away," came the answer from Jimpson.

"Oh, you know well enough that I won't try to get away," replied the young prisoner, calmly. "I want to stay out of the cell until I've seen Lawyer Hinds."

But just as the messenger whom Nate hired to go in search of the young lawyer was leaving the station-house, Mr. Hinds hustled in. Kit had gone straight to get him interested in the case.

Withdrawing to a corner, prisoner and attorney talked the matter over in undertones.

"Why, they haven't got a particle of a case against you!" cried the lawyer, cheerily. "You'll be free in the morning."

"Get Will Slater and bring him here," urged Nate. "We'll tell you plenty about what we overheard Gregg and his smooth lawyer saying to-day. You can draw it up in a paper, and we can both swear to it. Then, I reckon, it may be old Jasper Gregg who'll be yelling for the court to be good to him."

"I'll get Slater and bring him here at once," agreed the young lawyer, jumping up.

But he was gone for two hours. Nate, from being anxious, after a while, became tormented by anxiety.

"I can't find Slater anywhere," announced Hinds, running in, breathlessly, at last. "He isn't at home, or anywhere else that I can find. I'm going back to his home, now, to stay there all night, if need be, unless I see him sooner."

For the first time Nate showed signs of alarm.

"Will missing?" he whispered, hoarsely. "Mr. Hinds, do you think Gregg's crowd have done anything to him?"

"They may have lured him away with money," admitted the lawyer, slowly and thoughtfully.

"No, they haven't!" Nate interrupted, with vim. "You don't know Will Slater, or you wouldn't say that. If Will is missing, then the Gregg crowd know what happened to him. Mr. Hinds, I'm a good deal more anxious about Will now than I am about myself. Bring me the first news you can of poor old Will!"

Not very long was our hero left by himself.

His next visitor was—Lawyer Purrman!

"Ah, Fletcher," began the lawyer, in his oily tone, "I trust you're more willing to talk with me to-night."

"I'm not!" Nate retorted, shortly.

"It might be just as well for us to have a few words," urged the lawyer, persuasively.

Nate was on the point of giving a short, final answer, but something in the lawyer's voice made him reflect.

"Come to the other end of the guard-room, where we can

talk by ourselves," pleaded Purrman, and Nate allowed himself to be led.

There, where they could talk in undertones, without being overheard, Mr. Purrman began, briskly:

"Fletcher, you and a friend of yours overhead a conversation to-day that might be embarrassing to my client. Now, we'll get you promptly out of your trouble here, and pay you enough to go away and make a new start somewhere else, if you'll do what we want."

"What do you want?" asked Nate, curiously.

"Fletcher," whispered the lawyer, "I'll draw up a paper in which you confess that you and your friend, Slater, put up a plot to swear to a pretended conversation between Mr. Gregg and myself. You'll sign that under oath. What do we want it for? Simply for the protection of my client. Then, if you and Slater ever attempted to swear to the conversation that you sneakingly overheard to-day, Mr. Gregg could produce that paper and spoil your testimony."

"I won't sign it!" Nate retorted, promptly. "Will wouldn't, either."

"Slater isn't going to bother us any," remarked Lawyer Purrman, coolly.

Nate shot a swift look at this crooked limb of the law.

"Now, agree to sign this paper," whispered Purrman, eagerly, "and I'll prepare it and bring it to you at once. Then, in the morning, the case against you will be so flat that you'll be released at once. You'll be safe, and so will Gregg!"

"The case will go flat, anyway, in the morning," jeered Nate. "Your crowd haven't a particle of evidence against me that can be used, and you both know it."

"If you defy us," returned Purrman, harshly, "the case won't fall flat in the morning. The case will be so strong that you'll be bound over to the grand jury. The case will be so strong that you'll go behind the bars for a few years. Fletcher, I hear that you have a most charming young sweetheart. How will she like to see you in the stripes of the convict?"

But Nate, proudly refusing to even allude to Kit Tremont before this blackguard, retorted, coolly:

"It seems strange that a lawyer should expect to get a conviction without evidence."

"Evidence?" smiled the lawyer, cruelly. "Fletcher, the very money that you've been refusing to take from us will buy all the evidence we need against you. Yes, call it perjured evidence, if you will, but even bought evidence will send you to prison!"

Now Nate Fletcher's cheek blanched in earnest.

He understood at last—saw just how these scoundrels could land him in prison for years!

CHAPTER VII.

THE GLORY OF THE FIGHT.

Lawyer Purrman kept his gaze eagerly fixed on the boy's horror-struck face.

"I think you begin to realize, Fletcher, what wealth can do when your enemy holds that wealth."

"Wealth should never be in a scoundrel's hands!" uttered Nate, vengefully.

"We won't discuss that," said the lawyer, smilingly. "There is only one question we have to consider. I have come to draw up a paper that I have described to you, and I shall then be ready for you to sign it."

The lawyer spoke as complacently as if he considered the matter settled.

But Nate suddenly rose, fire flashing in his eyes.

"We've talked long enough, Mr. Purrman," he cried, a new note ringing in his voice.

"Yes; we have," assented the other. "I'll get to writing at once."

"To get to walking would be more to the purpose," retorted Nate.

"Eh?" questioned the lawyer, looking up from his search through his pockets for writing-material.

"Constable!" called Nate, loudly, across the room, "I am not obliged to see this fellow any longer, am I?"

"Not unless you want to," called back the officer.

"Be careful, boy!" menaced the lawyer, under his breath. "This is your last chance for liberty!"

But Nate, not favoring him even with a look, answered the officer:

"Please take this fellow out—at once—if he doesn't go willingly."

Purrman flashed a look at the boy that meant all sorts of threats.

Then, drawing himself up, Purrman asked, loudly enough for the approaching officer to hear:

"You really have no desire to talk with me further?"

Still Nate refused to look at Purrman, but said to the constable:

"Make him walk, if he won't go willingly. I'm tired of listening to him."

With a stiff bow, the rascally lawyer turned on his heel, stalking majestically down the guard-room.

"The scoundrel!" choked Nate to himself, striding up and down the room when he and the dozing officer were again the only occupants of the room. "Just because they have a little money—"

But Nate gulped hard, despite his wrath.

"They can do a whole lot! Money always can!" he cried to himself. "There are men in this world—clean enough looking chaps, too—who'll swear to anything for a hundred-dollar bill, or a few of 'em. Of course a lawyer like Purrman will know where to find a half-dozen such people if he needs 'em."

But Nate's eyes soon began to glisten under the lash that his thoughts supplied him.

"Let 'em do it, if they want!" he resolved, clenching his hands. "I am right in doing what I am doing. I couldn't be right if I swore to a lie as Gregg and his poodle want me to do! Gregg wants me to do a crooked thing. The very insult of his proposition is a greater wrong to me than prison itself could be! I'll fight Gregg to the finish—no matter what happens now!"

The love of fight—the very glory of battle when one's cause is just—fired Nate Fletcher now.

"The fight is on—we'll have it to a finish! And I've got Right for my ally!" he uttered, grimly.

Lawyer Hinds was in once more that night—to say that he had hunted high and low, and that Will Slater could not be found.

"It's mighty queer!" muttered Nate.

"It's more than queer," agreed the lawyer. "It's——" "Suspicious!"

"Just the word I was going to use," nodded the lawyer.

"Gregg and his lawyer are behind Will's disappearance," Nate cried angrily. "Will couldn't be hired simply to skip and leave me in the lurch. There's been foul play somewhere."

"But saying so," put in Lawyer Hinds, shrewdly, "won't prove anything against the enemy. So we'll have to keep quiet on that point, unless the chance comes to prove something."

After his lawyer had gone, Nate was forced to go to his cell.

There he spent a wretched, wakeful night.

Breakfast, in the morning, was brought him by his aunt. But Kit came with her.

Aunt Minnie, who knew the whole story, kept her lips grimly shut, only to remark once:

"Of course there's nothing in this fool charge, Nate, and so they won't be able to prove anything against you."

Two hours later the little court-room was crowded, every one having come to gape at the solitary prisoner.

But Nate stood their gaping well, nodding smilingly to those of his friends who still thought enough of him to smile, or wave their greetings.

Lawyer Purrrman had taken it upon himself to appear as the prosecutor.

"May it please the court," began the lawyer, rising, "it has been impossible for us to get our witnesses here as soon as this. In order that the case may be thoroughly prepared, we ask that this case be adjourned for two weeks."

"You will oppose the release of the prisoner into my custody?" suggested Lawyer Hinds, sarcastically.

"Most emphatically would we oppose it," retorted Purrrman, indignantly. "This boy is accused of a most infamous crime—that of helping a fugitive from justice to escape. We will ask the court that bail, in this case, be made high enough to cover the possibilities that the prisoner might seek to escape. We ask the court to fix bail in the sum of five thousand dollars."

"Might as well make it a million!" uttered Nate, in his lawyer's ear.

Then Lawyer Hinds went on the warpath of oratory. But the court presently cut him short by fixing bail at two thousand dollars.

"I'd just as soon it was a million," smiled Nate, rising.

None of the friends who would have trusted our hero on bail had means enough to supply such bail.

Nate looked smilingly around the court-room, his gaze

falling with especial earnestness on Aunt Minnie and on Kit.

• Then back to the lock-up he went, to wait for a fortnight more.

Aunt Minnie sent him a couple of his favorite books, Kit a nosegay. Nate tried to make himself comfortable through the day.

Late in the afternoon Lawyer Purrrmann was led to the door of the boy's cell.

When the constable had gone to the further end of the room, the lawyer whispered in between the bars:

"Changed your mind any?"

"Constable!" shouted Nate. "I wish you could keep such vermin away from me. I've nothing to say to this fellow now, or at any other time. Don't let him in again to see me, please!"

"All right! Take your full dose of the bitter! You'll get it!" whispered the lawyer, venomously; then turned and stalked away.

Just about an hour after that, Lawyer Hinds hurried up to the door of the cell, followed by the constable, jingling keys.

"It's all right, now, Nate, my boy! You can come out! I've just put up cash bail with the judge!"

Which happy news the constable promptly made good by unlocking the cell door.

"What——" began Nate, walking out almost in a daze.

"Not a word!" commanded Hinds, gripping his arm.

But, outside, the lawyer whispered:

"Go up to the hotel. Not right away, you understand. A little later on. Ask to see a Mr. Carter. He'll explain it all to you, for he has the advantage of knowing what it all means. I don't."

"Does Aunt Min know that I'm loose?"

"Don't believe she does."

"Then she finds out right away," purposed Nate.

"That's right. You've got time enough to go home. Don't go to Mr. Carter soon enough to attract attention to him."

So Nate hustled home up the road, stopping only to nod and call out to the few friends whom he saw on the way.

Just a moment did he tarry with Aunt Min, to tell her the glad news that some one—unknown—had come to his rescue.

Then off to Kit's house flew the boy.

But Kit had already heard the good news, by rumor, and was staying at home, sure that he would call as quickly as he could.

"There's some great mystery behind this all," said Kit, looking at him with anxious eyes. "One of these days I suppose you'll tell me what it all means?"

"When I have the right to, I will," Nate replied, promptly.

Then, at last, he drifted down to the hotel, sending up his name to "Mr. Carter."

In a few moments more that gentleman opened his door to Nate.

Our hero did not cry out; he was too smart for that, and had too much presence of mind.

But, the instant the door was closed, he rested his hand in Mr. Philip Bentley's.

"I thought it best to come here under another name," explained the yachtsman, in a cautious whisper. "I was in the city, and got a telegram from Miss Graylock, telling me of a telegram she had received from you. I hustled here at once, to find out what was doing, and the first thing I learned was that Gregg is up to his old tricks of making trouble for other folks. Fortunately, I had seen to bringing plenty of cash with me, so I was able to turn your bail-money over to your lawyer."

"But Tom Treadwell?" breathed the boy, as soon as he had uttered his own thanks.

"Safe out of the country!" smiled Bentley. "I got well out to sea, and then put Tom aboard of another vessel."

"Then things are all right," smiled Nate.

"All except for you, my boy. Gregg is a scoundrel. Frankly, I am afraid of what he might try to do with perjured testimony and that infernally slick lawyer of his. But, of one thing be sure. You'll have everything done for you that my money can secure—except the buying of false evidence."

"And that I don't want. But I've a friend who got in trouble through this matter. I am afraid there's been foul play. I want to talk to you about it."

"Wait a bit, then."

"Mr. Carter" rang the bell, ordering a horse and buggy.

"We'll take a drive, my boy, and feel safer from eavesdroppers."

"Look out that something doesn't happen to us!"

"Mr. Carter" smiled, showing his fine, white teeth. At the same time he displayed other "teeth"—the butt of a revolver in his hip-pocket.

As they drove over country roads, first making sure that no listener was "cutting behind," Nate Fletcher poured out all his troubles in Bentley's sympathetic ear.

"As to Will Slater," proposed Bentley, "don't be too uneasy about him. I'll put expert searchers out to track him. We'll find him—never fear. And now"—glancing at his watch—"I guess it's about time to return to the hotel. The train will be in by the time we get there, and you're to meet some one else who's interested in this affair."

"Who?"

"Miss Nance Graylock, the girl who was the innocent cause of all this trouble."

"She—coming here?"

"Don't you doubt it!" clicked Bentley. "She's wrapped up, heart and soul, in Tom Treadwell's cause. She'd go to China, if there was anything doing for Tom. The instant she got your telegram she wired me, then got on the train and started East. You'll find Nance a famous girl!"

Half an hour later Nate was presented to Nance Graylock at the hotel, where she was stopping under her own name.

Nance Graylock was of the queenly beauty type, but she knew how to be pleasant and kind.

She won Nate Fletcher at once. He was glad he was involved in the terrible case, now, if it enabled him to serve this splendid young woman.

"I must, if possible, get some suitable young lady in this village to live here at the hotel with me while I am here," Nance announced at last. "Mr. Fletcher, do you know of such a young lady—one whom I can really make a friend and chum of?"

"Give me a little time, and I'll find out," proposed Nate, rising and taking his hat.

To Kit, whom he found at home, he painted Nance Graylock in such glowing colors that Kit's curiosity equaled her desire to earn a little money.

Nate brought them together within the hour. The two girls liked each other immensely from the start.

Before the evening was over, Kit knew most of the story—knew it from Nance's lips.

In the meantime Philip Bentley, at work with all probable vim and snap, had put searchers at work to try to find out what had become of Will Slater.

One night's search, however, did not solve that question. Nor did the next day's search, or a week's.

Ten miserably anxious days dragged by without a sign or word from Slater.

Will's mother was reported to be almost out of her mind from worry and grief.

Kit's sharp, anxious mind saw another worrying aspect of the matter.

"It shows," she told Nate, "what the power of that wicked man, Gregg, really is."

"The power of Gregg's money, you mean," Nate muttered.

"It's all one and the same thing," Kit declared. "Oh, Nate, you poor dear, sometimes I can't help shuddering!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GREGG'S WEAK KNEES.

"Now, just what are you going to do, Nate?" asked Nance Graylock, in her low, sweet voice, fixing her eyes on the boy's face.

It was in Nance's rooms at the hotel.

Kit was there, too, also the faithful Bentley.

"I don't know. Its mighty close to the trial, but I can't do a thing, until I find out what Gregg's move is to be," declared the boy.

He tried to speak bravely, and there was a smile on his face, but an ache at his heart.

"Tell you one thing you can do," smiled Bentley.

"What?"

"Skip your bail! Fly!"

"And leave you in the lurch as my bondsman?" demanded Nate, indignantly.

"Forget that part of it," laughed Bentley. "You stood by Tom, and I'll stand by you. So, if you think well of

skipping the country, I'll put up the funds for you to get away with."

"Don't talk like that!" begged Nate.

"Why not?"

"I'm not of the skipping kind."

"But if it looks like your only chance for liberty?"

"Even then I would not skip. I'll stay and face the music. Why, do you think I want to be a fugitive from justice? And, besides, it would look like a confession of guilt."

"Did it look like a confession of Tom's guilt for him to get away to safety?" demanded Nance, in an almost hurt voice.

"I'm not going to do it," the boy retorted.

"It looks like your only chance," Bentley urged. "We all know how heartlessly that scoundrel, Gregg, will use paid-for evidence against you."

"I'm going to stay and fight it out," muttered Nate, resolutely. "Why, I never had a fight on my hands before, and I'm rather getting to enjoy it!"

His eyes glowed as he spoke. Kit smiled at him encouragingly.

All girls like bravery in a fellow.

"Well, do as you like," sighed Bentley. "But I'm afraid you won't like fighting as well if you happen to lose and have to go behind the bars for a few years."

"I won't go behind the bars!" declared Nate, rising. "Another reason why I won't skip is that that would be leaving Will Slater to his fate."

"That's all we seem able to do," groaned Bentley. "I've had men out, and good men, too, but they can't bring me a trace of your young friend."

"I'm going out for a walk," declared Nate. "I want to think. There are a few cobwebs that need to be cleared away from my brain."

Gregg was still stopping in the hotel, though Lawyer Purrrman was away for the time being.

As Gregg did not know Bentley, the latter still kept up his name of "Mr. Carter."

Of course Gregg knew that Nance Graylock was in the hotel, but they never met. Nance took good care of that.

As Nate passed through the hotel office now he caught sight of Jasper Gregg strolling by the door.

"It's a pity he can't get some of his own medicine," thought the boy, bitterly.

By the time that Nate reached the sidewalk he discovered that Gregg had stopped to look in a store window two doors below.

"Hi, there! Run for your lives!"

The appeal came hoarsely from a nearby doorway, followed by the banging of a door.

It was high time to run.

Down the street, coming straight toward them, at a mad gallop, was a bull, its horns lowered close to the sidewalk.

Only a glance was needed to tell that the bull was utterly maddened, bent on a tour of destruction.

Like a flash Nate dodged into the store doorway.

He would have bolted through the door, into the store, had it not been for the antics of Jasper Gregg.

The scoundrel, seeing the danger that was so close at hand, became afflicted with weak knees.

Nate, watching the fellow sink to his knees on the sidewalk and raise his hands supplicatingly to heaven, stood looking on, fascinated by the sight.

"Oh, Lord," chattered Gregg, his voice hoarse with terror, "spare the vilest of sinners! Lord, I will repair all the wickedness I've done!"

It was all over in a second.

A yell from a window across the street, the flaunting of a red tablecloth, and the mad bull veered, plunging first towards the flaunting red, then keeping on up the middle of the street.

Then, the bull gone, people flocked out of the houses.

Jasper Gregg, still very weak and trembling, recovered his feet and tottered into the hotel office.

Nate was in the crowd on the street. Close to him was a man with a rifle.

"Pity I couldn't snatch up this rifle in time to use it!" growled the man.

"Oh, Gracious! Look out! Here's that awful bull coming back!"

There was no mistake about it.

Up the street was the bull, headed their way again.

There was an instant flight for safety indoors.

Even the man with the rifle joined the flight.

Nate sprang after him, laying both hands on the rifle barrel.

"Leggo!" squealed the gun's owner.

"Gun loaded?" breathed Nate.

"Yep."

"Then you let go!"

Nate snatched the gun away, its owner too intent on reaching safety to make any fuss about it.

In a twinkling Nate Fletcher and the mad bull had the street to themselves once more.

People, as soon as they gained safety, looked on out of windows in horrified wonder.

Nate had taken up his position, leaning against a telegraph pole.

In this position he figured that, if the bull charged him, it would crash its own head against the pole.

Yet, even with that kind of protection, it took nerve to wait there.

Nate had been developing nerve of late.

He held the rifle steadily aimed, the hammer cocked.

Espying the boy and the gun, and seeing in the sight some sort of menace, the bull charged toward the pole.

Praying a bit, even as Gregg had done, our hero waited until the bull's lowered head was ten feet or so away.

Then there came a flash from the muzzle of the rifle.

It was a fair hit between the eyes.

Staggering forward, the bull lurched, then fell almost at our hero's feet.

Two more quick shots sounded. The bull, with three

holes in his head, was past the possibility of ever harming anyone again.

Now the crowd flocked out once more in eager joy.

But in all that little country throng Fletcher looked for but one face—Jasper Gregg's.

Gregg did not come out of the hotel.

With a grim smile our hero handed the rifle back to its shamefaced owner, at whom many of the crowd were now jeering.

Straight into the hotel office marched Nate.

He found the room deserted by all except Jasper Gregg and himself.

Straight up to the scoundrel walked the boy.

Jasper Gregg looked at him in intense astonishment.

"You?" blurted out the scoundrel. "Are you going to have the cheek to talk to me?"

"Why, that was what I came in here for," Nate admitted, coolly.

"To talk to me? What about?" gasped Gregg.

"That little conversation."

"Eh?"

"The one I happened to overhear just a few moments ago."

Gregg's face was a study in perplexity.

"You cheeky young vagabond, I don't recall any conversation just now."

"I mean," proposed Nate, coolly, "that conversation you just had out on the sidewalk."

"Conversation?" gasped Gregg. "With whom?"

"With the Lord!"

"With —? You young vagabond, what are you talking about?"

"Perhaps I dreamed it," suggested Nate, grimly. "But I was sure that I heard you promise the Lord that, if He'd protect you from that mad bull, you'd undo all the wicked harm you had done."

"Go away from me!" roared Gregg.

"Then you deny using those words?"

"Go away from me!" raged the scoundrel.

"That's the way some folks keep the promises they make to the Lord," uttered the boy, contemptuously. "Gregg, don't you ever hate or despise yourself? I am sure the Lord must despise you!"

"Get away from me, or I'll —"

Just what Jasper Gregg would do remained a secret, for at that instant the hotel door was forced open by an in-rushing throng.

"Here he is!"

"What's the matter with Nate Fletcher?"

"He's all right every time!"

"Confusion to his enemies!"

Before that blast Jasper Gregg thought it wise to hurry away.

But the crowd paid no attention to him.

Those who had seen, or had heard of Nate's gritty stopping of the bull were eager to get him up on their shoulders and parade him before the Main Street crowd.

As Jasper Gregg, puffing and very red in the face, found his way upstairs, his ears were assailed by the cheers outside for Nate Fletcher.

As soon as he could, Nate, escaping from the hero worshippers, hurried out on the road that led to home.

"I don't know but I'll turn in at the mill, though," he reflected. "It's quiet in there, and I can walk up and down and think. Gracious! What happiness and profit I had hoped to get out of running that old mill! And now it looks as if I'd never have a chance to do it!"

He turned down the by-road that led to the mill beside the little river.

Just as he reached a pile of weather-worn slabs that stood heaped up near the main door of the mill, Nate got one of the shocks of his life.

Around the pile staggered a worn, spent and bleeding boy.

A boy whose eyes roved around him unreasoningly.

In those eyes there was the glare of approaching madness.

Just as Nate caught sight of him that other youngster reeled and fell in a heap.

"Will Slater!" almost screamed Nate

CHAPTER IX.

TRICKED BY ZEAL.

"Poor old Will!" Nate almost sobbed, sinking on his knees beside the wreck of a boy. "What on earth has happened to you?"

"They—they tried to—keep me—but I was—too smart for 'em!" babbled Will, with a wild laugh that cut into Nate's heart.

"Will, do you know me?"

"Oh, I know a heap!" boasted Will, in a discordant tone that hurt the hearer.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Do you know who I am?" leered the other youngster.

"Gracious! Something's got to be done here quick!" throbbed Nate. "Shall I get help and take him home?"

But a sudden dread assailed our hero.

"If Will was abducted before, and taken away, he most likely has escaped. If the rascals know where he is, they'll try to abduct him again. Poor old Will! You couldn't stand another trip like this!"

Nat looked swiftly around him, discovering that the coast was clear.

The mill was in a rather lonely spot, anyway.

Running quickly to the door, Nate unlocked it.

Then, returning and bending over his chum, young Fletcher resolutely lifted him.

Will was a good-sized, heavy load, but Nate managed to stagger in under his burden.

Shutting and locking the door behind them, our hero got his wind, next lifted Will once more and got him, a few steps at a time, up the flight of stairs to a room above.

Here, on a pile of old canvas, Fletcher laid his friend.

He lay like one in a stupor. Nate felt his pulse. It was doing just a little more than flutter.

"I'll go for his father. I'm glad I know where to find him!" breathed Nate.

The elder Slater, a carpenter, was at that time engaged on a house just outside the village.

To him Nate went about as fast as he could travel.

"Get the doctor, Mr. Slater, and come down to the mill," urged Nate. "I'll be there to let you in. And the doctor'd better walk, for the sight of a buggy outside would put folks wise."

Then Nate hurried back.

But he was not there long before Mr. Slater arrived. Will seemed just about half to know his father.

Then Dr. Spencer arrived, on foot.

"He's had a fight, and it must have been an ugly one," pronounced the doctor, shaking his head. "He's had hard usage, poor lad."

But you can pull him through? That's the question!" breathed Will's father, almost fiercely.

"Your son's likely to have an attack of brain fever," announced the doctor. "We can never tell how such a fever is going to turn out."

"Will it be safe to take him home?" asked Nate. "Or will there be danger of his being seen by the rascals who are at the bottom of this outrage."

"Oh, the lad must be taken home," declared Dr. Spencer. "There are no facilities here for taking care of as sick a lad as this young man is."

"He'll be safe at home," uttered Mr. Slater, grimly. "I'll answer for that—answer for it with a gun! I'd like to see anyone do harm to my boy at his home. I'll be there to meet 'em!"

So Dr. Spencer, after doing what he could immediately, went off to send a wagon.

On the mattress in the wagon Will was laid, and taken to his home, Nate and the boy's father riding with the patient.

Like wild-fire the news spread.

Many people called that day at the Slater home.

One of Will's younger brothers was stationed at the gate to tell all callers that no one could be allowed at the house.

Will tossed in a fever, but the physician had yet some hopes that the attack might not go as far as brain fever.

All the while Nate sat by his chum's side, the boy's father and mother moving about the room at their tasks in caring for the sick one.

"It's a mean place to keep anyone—in an old cellar like this!" moaned Will once, in his delirium.

Nate heard, and pricked up his ears.

"What place is this? Do you know?" he asked, softly.

"Of course I do!" Will retorted sharply.

"I don't believe you do!"

"Yes, I do!"

"Then tell me, and see if you're right."

"Oh, ain't you smart?" taunted Will, in his delirium.

"But you said this was a cellar."

"So it is!"

"Where?"

"In the old house next to ——"

"Oh, you're away off, taunted Nate, shrewdly.

"Am I, though?" raged the delirious boy.

Both Mr. Slater and his wife had gone out of the room for the moment, or they might have objected to this talk with the sick boy.

"What is this cellar next to?" Nate persisted, teasingly.

"Don't you s'pose I know, when Nate and I have played around here so often?" insisted the fevered one, shrilly.

"I don't believe you know. You're fooling me," persisted Fletcher. "You said it was in the house next to the ——"

Here Nate paused sharply, on purpose.

"Charcoal pit!" spouted Will, triumphantly. "There! I told you I knew!"

After that he mumbled a bit, then lay quiet, as if likely to go to sleep.

"I believe he has told me right," murmured Nate. "He made a great effort to get it off his mind, and now he feels so easy that he's growing drowsy."

That old charcoal pit? How well Nate knew it, and the old house, close by, in which the owner of the pit had once lived with his family and workmen.

About three miles out of town, up in one of the loneliest spots among the hills was where the pit still stood. It had not been used for years, the gradual cheapening of coal having driven the charcoal industry away.

"It's a bully place to hide anyone, in that old house. No one ever goes there," muttered Nate. "Jupiter, but I'd like to go up there. The fellows that had Will so long may still be there, waiting orders as to what to do next. And, gracious! They may be the same gang that are to supply the alleged witnesses against me. Wouldn't it be great, though, to connect Will's tormentors with the fellows who are going to swear against me?"

Nate thought of it until his face glowed almost as warm as that of poor, fever-racked Will Slater.

But he stuck to his post through the afternoon, until it was time to run up home for his supper.

That meal eaten, Nate, who had difficulty in concealing his new excitement from Aunt Minnie, announced that he was going down to the hotel to see "Mr. Carter."

"About your case, I suppose?" asked Aunt Minnie, anxiously.

"Yes."

"Oh, dear! I do hope he'll be able to do something to help you get off," sighed Aunt Minnie, the tears beginning to come to her eyes.

Nate kissed away the tears, laughing as merrily as he was able.

Then, out on the road, he made fast tracks for the hotel. But there a disappointment awaited him.

Bentley had gone away that afternoon, not to return until the next day.

"Stay and spend the evening with us," invited Nance, hospitably.

Kit's eyes seconded the invitation.

But the boy shook his head.

"I'd like to, but I've got something else on hand. It's a little matter of business that really won't wait. Perhaps I'll drop in a little later."

"Be sure to," urged Kit.

Smiling his assent, Nate withdrew.

It was a great disappointment not to have had Bentley's company.

"But the matter can't wait," Nate told himself. "It's got to be attended to to-night. Who else can I get up to the old pit with me?"

Yet, as the boy thought over the names of his few friends he shook his head.

"Not one of 'em would be any good for a matter like this," he told himself.

So he decided to go on the long tramp alone!

"I can easily enough snoop around and find out whether there's anyone there now," he told himself. "If there is, I can come back and get Lawyer Hinds to set the constables on. There won't be any risk in going alone, if I'm careful."

He burned with zeal to be doing something.

With his trial so close at hand, and his friends unable to see anything that could be done to save him from the other side's perjured evidence, Nate Fletcher felt wholly desperate.

Nor did his courage or determination flag once during that long, lonesome tramp up into the distant hills.

Three miles of rough hill-climbing is harder work than a tramp twice as long over level roads.

Nate was almost footsore, and rather out of breath by the time that he got within easy distance of the old pit.

It was situated well away from the rough highway.

Once upon a time there had been a fairly good wagon road from the highway to the pit, but this had long fallen into disuse and had been overgrown.

"It'll be just as well to go cautiously, now," said the boy to himself, as he came near what was left of the old wagon road.

Not for a moment did he think of approaching the pit along the old, disused road.

"I've got to be slicker than that, if there are any real enemies there," he told himself.

The night had grown steadily darker since his start from Dreamhaven.

"I don't believe I'll lose my way—I've been here so often with Will," murmured the boy, not without a chilly little shudder, as he stepped into the dense blackness under the trees.

An ill-at-ease feeling began to creep under him, but he would not turn back.

It seemed almost ghastly to be going alone through those dark woods.

If they did not contain enemies, it would be all right.

But he had come this far in the hope that he would get on the trail of the enemies whom he dreaded most.

Crackle! Will had stepped on a twig. It broke with a noise that made him jump and caused his heart to go faster.

"Oh, pshaw! I mustn't be a regular baby!" he protested to himself, and went forward again, still stepping as if walking on eggs.

Crackle! Again he jumped, for that sound was several feet away from him.

Ere our hero could turn a pair of sinewy arms wound themselves around him.

"I've got someone—a kid!" growled an exultant voice. "Take care of those that may be coming behind him!"

There were steps made by others now.

Nate struggled to free himself, but his big captor threw the boy to the ground with ease.

Then that rascal sat down hard on Nate, resting a big, powerful hand on Nate's windpipe.

"Your comfort depends on yourself now," announced this scoundrel, coolly. "No talking is allowed."

Those other men whose footsteps Nate heard had gone further off, until no more sound came to him.

But presently they came trudging back again, one of them calling out:

"Where are you?"

"Here," declared Nate's heavy captor.

Three other men crowded about the scared prisoner.

"Strike a match!" ordered one of them.

Flare! The light of the match glowed a sickly yellow close to Nate Fletcher's face.

"Whew!" whistled one of the men.

"What's up?"

"We've got the very king-pin of all the trouble!"

"Not ——"

"Young Nate Fletcher—and be hanged to him!" growled the ugly voice of the man who announced the discovery.

CHAPTER X.

A RED HEAT.

"Nate Fletcher?" asked another of the group, hoarsely.

"Yes, it's him!"

"But we don't want him!"

"We want him the worst way—now!"

"It's against orders. We might have got him any night in the last fortnight, if we hadn't had orders against it."

"But now that he has found us out ——"

"Oh, I suppose we'll have to keep him. Bring him along—and stave his head in if he dares to make any racket."

Is it time for me to say something?" Nate asked, in a as cool a voice as he could summon.

"Depends on what you want to say," grimly returned the fellow who appeared to lead this quartette.

"All I want to say is that I'm able to walk."

"And you'll do it?"

"Yes, and without putting you to the trouble of massaging my head with a club."

"He's a fresh, cool youngster, all right!" grinned one of the ruffians.

"I guess he'd have to be, to put up all the fight we've heard about," opined another.

"His fighting days are over—now!" retorted the leader. "Let him walk then, but hold on to him in case he tries any fancy steps."

Nate found the charcoal pit readily enough now, with four eager guides to pilot him.

One of the crowd went ahead to unlock the door of the run-down old shanty of a house.

"Bring him right in and make him feel at home," grinned this fellow, holding open the door.

Nate was forced inside, and held there while one of the gang fumbled for a lantern and lighted it.

They were in the main living room of the house.

Leaves and fir boughs had been spread at the side of the room, to take the place of mattresses, and over them blankets were thrown.

The shutters on the windows were closed, but blankets had been nailed up over the windows as an added precaution against letting out any tell-tale rays of light.

"Sit down on the floor," ordered the leader of the gang, gruffly. "It's the best we've got to offer."

Nate obeyed without demur, though his eyes traveled from one to another of the group.

The leader himself, and two of the others looked as if they would make a fairly presentable appearance in better clothes.

But the big fellow, the one who had caught and thrown our hero, had a face that would have been distrusted by any judge in Christendom.

"It's the other three who'll tog up a bit better and swear against me," decided the boy. "That is, if I'm to be allowed to go into court now!"

"So your friend has given you a notion of where he was, has he?" demanded the leader. "You never happened to think that his escape might give us a notion to watch the woods to-night?"

"What difference does it make what I think?" Fletcher asked, trying to force a smile.

"It doesn't—here," agreed the leader.

"Say, we ain't going to sit here and look at the kid all night, are we?" demanded the big man.

"No need to," agreed the leader. "You can fix him."

"Lay over on your face!" ordered the big man, gruffly, as he stepped heavily toward our hero.

Nate judged it best to obey, though he wondered, with a shudder, if they meant to kill him.

But the big fellow knelt on his shoulder blades, doing nothing worse than tying the boy's hands behind him.

Fletcher's feet then suffered a similar confinement.

"Gag him?" inquired the big man.

"You'd better, to-night," assented the leader. "There may be others hanging around."

Nate opened his mouth without protest. Where was the

use of putting up a hopeless fight against all this brute strength.

"Now, then," ordered the leader, "dump him!"

Another of the crew raised a trap-door in the floor.

Towards this opening the big fellow dragged the now helpless youngster.

Shove! bump! Nate landed unceremoniously, on his side, on a soft, clayey bed at the bottom of the cellar.

"Now, how much better am I off for my night's work?" wondered the boy, desperately. "Thunderation! Now, old Gregg can do anything he wants to me. What's next, I wonder?"

He knew he must be in the place where Will had lain for days.

"But I won't stay here, if there's any ghost of a show for me to get out!" he groaned. "And I've got to be moving, too, for these fellows are about certain to send to Gregg for orders. Those orders may not be the kind I'd like, either."

While his wrists were being tied Nate had tried artfully to make the muscles, arteries and veins stand out.

At the same time, he had tried to pull his wrists just a bit apart, though not enough to excite the suspicions of his captors.

Now, he made a trial to see whether he could force these lashings.

It was not as easy as he had hoped it would be.

While he tugged and strained, he could hear the low voices of his captors overhead.

At the end of nearly an hour's work, Nate Fletcher succeeded in wriggling his left hand out of the lashing.

After that it was not difficult.

Just after he had removed the last bit of cord from his wrists he heard the tread of feet overhead.

Then all was still.

"Perhaps they've all gone out, to take another look for prowlers?" thrilled the boy. "Gracious! I hope so."

The gag was quickly out of his mouth, nor did it take him long, with the aid of his pocket knife, to slash the cords from his ankles.

"Now," smiled Nate, straightening up and stretching, "I'm free—all except the getting away."

At the risk of his light being seen, he felt it best to strike matches down there in the dark.

By so doing, he found an empty box. He was able to move this, softly, just under the trap door.

Standing on this box, he could reach above with freedom. He tried the trap door. That yielded easily enough.

Slowly, inch by inch, Nate pushed it further up.

There was no light, now, in the room overhead, which made it look as if all his new jailers had departed.

Swiftly Nate Fletcher drew himself up through the hole. Then, crouching on the floor, he listened.

Hearing no sound, he stood up on the floor, then moved with the soft feet of a cat.

Groping, in the darkness, he reached the door, tried it. It yielded.

Taking a long breath, Nate pushed the door further open. At a distance of a dozen feet stood the big man. His glance had been attracted by the apparent blowing open of the door.

They saw each other in the same instant. "You?" exploded the big man, making a bound forward. "By —"

At the first glance of the enemy our hero fairly bolted, straight into the woods.

Strength was the big man's specialty—not speed. "Hey!" he bellowed, at his loudest. "The kid's getting away. Catch him!"

Nate dodged behind a tree, then stopped short, his heart beating furiously.

Past him crashed the big man, who had not seen the fugitive's sudden side-step.

Then, not more than a hundred yards away Nate heard voices.

"That shows me the way not to go," grimaced the boy. Softly he stole back away from the voices.

But now the crackling of a twig in the forest in the direction in which he was headed, brought him to another throbbing stop.

"That's the worst of it!" he groaned. "Whichever way I go, I'm almost sure to stumble upon one of the crowd. And they've pretty surely got the ground covered by this time!"

Not daring to breathe in earnest, Nate crouched close to a tree, listening, straining.

In this terror a half an hour passed. It seemed more like a month.

"I reckon I'm safe now," hazarded the boy. "That you, Jed?" demanded a voice right in front of him.

"Yep," answered a low voice not far behind our hero in the dark.

Nate Fletcher thought he could feel his hat rising on the hairs that were standing straight up.

"Gracious! That was a close one!" he squeaked, inwardly.

For another hour that game of hide and seek—of the silent, most terrible kind—went on.

But Nate did not again attempt to stir.

He had resolved to wait for daylight, that he might be able to see in which direction he could attempt an almost hopeless break for freedom.

"I shan't be surprised at finding myself gray-headed when daylight comes," quivered Fletcher.

"Aw, growled the voice of the big man, at last, "the best we can do is to beat it out of here. That Fletcher kid is asleep in his bed by this time."

"If I thought so," grumbled the leader, "we'd go there and shake him out of it."

"Wouldn't do no good," declared another voice. "That kid is smart enough to keep out of our way, after what happened to him to-night."

Now trembling Nate felt devoutly thankful that he had not stirred in the last hour.

These voices came from all sides, showing what a network the ruffians had accidentally set around him.

"We'd better beat it ourselves. There'll be trouble brewing her soon," urged another of the crew.

"Just as well to play twenty-three, I guess," assented the leader. "Come along, then."

Nate, peering from behind the trunk of a great tree, could just dimly make out the figures of two of the quartette, so closely did they pass him.

Then, after a moment or two all was quiet in the woods.

"But I don't stir yet," Nate told himself. "They may have skipped. Then again, that move may be only a trick."

For another hour he squatted silently on the ground.

"Oh, hang it, I guess they're really gone by this time, or I'd have heard something," decided the youngster.

He rose, feeling more confident, though well he knew that he was not yet surely out of danger.

He reached the highway, but did not attempt to travel by it.

Instead, he stole softly across, taking to the woods on the other side.

It was a long, tortuous way back to town that he took, all the while going with the utmost caution.

Daylight was coming in by the time that he trod once more on the streets with a feeling of greater relief.

"They'll be sure to be up at Will's," decided the boy. "I'll drop around and see how the poor fellow's pulling through."

At the little cottage he found Mrs. Slater, looking done up, sitting on the front doorstep.

"Will isn't here," she announced. "He talked so much about the mill, and seemed to think he was there, or wished he was there, that Doc Spencer said it'd be best to take him back there. So they took him there on the wagon 'most two hours ago. They took along a cot and some other things, and Ab Macey went along with his shotgun, to help watch against that awful gang. Doc Spencer was by here a little while ago, and said that Will seemed easier since he was taken to the mill."

Nate hurried down to the mill, to find Abner Macey seated in the doorway with his shotgun close at hand.

Upstairs Will, watched by his father, was sleeping soundly at last.

"He's going to pull through all right," declared Mr. Slater, confidently.

Then, beckoned out into the next room, Mr. Slater heard of our hero's adventures through the night.

"I wish to goodness you had taken a crowd up there with you!" cried Slater, angrily.

"It wouldn't have done any good," negatived Nate. "The gang were on the lookout, and a crowd would have given them the tip to get away."

Worn out, our hero decided not to climb another hill to the farmhouse just now.

Instead, he waited until it was time to get breakfast at the hotel.

Then, after sending a message to his aunt to let her know

that he was safe, Fletcher went into the hotel dining-room for the breakfast—and the coffee—that he felt so much in need of.

Jasper Gregg did not put in an appearance—not even in the hotel office where Nate went, presently, to read a morning paper until it almost put him asleep.

At last, when the office clock pointed to nine, Nate climbed the stairs to knock on the door of Miss Nance's rooms.

"Who's there?" called Miss Graylock.

"It's I—Nate Fletcher. But I'll come later, if—"

The door opened suddenly. Miss Nance admitted him, then locked the door after him.

Kit Tremont was in the room, too.

Both the young ladies looked extremely strange.

"I'm going to show you something," Nance whispered, tremulously, in our hero's ear. "But don't make a sound!"

Wondering, Nate allowed himself to be led by the arm.

Nance Graylock led him to a cupboard door, pulled it softly open, and there stood —

Tom Treadwell!

CHAPTER XI.

THE LIGHTNING STRIKES.

"Howdy, old chap?" whispered smiling Tom, holding out his hand.

Nate gripped the hand, to make sure it was real flesh. Then he drew back a step, staring hard.

"You here?" faltered our hero.

"Don't you see me?" whispered gleeful Tom.

"But I thought you were out of the country?"

"So I was, until —"

"Tom, dear," interrupted Nance's tender whisper. I'd better shut the door now. I can tell Nate all about it."

Still smiling, Tom Treadwell held out his hand once more, and Nate wrung it with fervor.

Then the boy turned his back, while there came a sound as if Tom and Nance had some tender little business of their own on.

Then the door closed, softly, and Nance, taking our hero by the arm, led him to the sofa, where he sat between the two girls.

"It was a fearfully foolish thing that Tom did," whispered Nance, agitatedly. "I cabled him—he was hiding safely in Guatemala, in Central America—that evidence was at hand that would clear him. That was when I got your telegram, Nate. I also told Tom in that cablegram that I had wired Mr. Bentley, and that we would both work to clear him. The poor, foolish, impatient fellow! He jumped to it that he was cleared right away, and hurried up north on the first steamer. He came right here—arrived an hour ago."

"What is he going to do now?" asked Nate, anxiously.

He wants to hide in this part of the country until we get him cleared before the law."

"With Gregg, Purrman, and heaven only knows who else working against his interests here?"

"But Tom hopes to be cleared soon," Nance confided.

"Poor Tom!"

"Poor Nate!" murmured Kit.

"Is there no such thing as right or justice in this country any longer?" breathed Nance, passionately. "Must two splendid, upright fellows be ruined for life just because their unprincipled enemy has more money than he ought to be allowed to have?"

In a few moments, however, Miss Graylock was calm enough to ask:

"What would you advise, Nate Fletcher?"

"I think Tom ought to go away. He's in danger, every minute, of being caught here. But he will want to talk with Mr. Bentley, and Bentley isn't here. It won't do for Tom to leave the hotel now, in daylight, but he ought to be gotten away from here some time to-night. That is, unless Mr. Bentley comes in the meantime. Then he can advise. But for Tom to stay here—right here—with both Gregg and Purrman around so much—that spells c-a-p-t-u-r-e."

"Where can you take Tom, when night comes?" Nance queried, thoughtfully.

"Why, down to the old mill. Nobody will ever think of going there. Besides, we're taking care of Will there, and, if we're seen going in and out of the mill, it will be thought that we're going there to see Will. Now, up in the old grain room, on the top floor, you and Tom can have hours and hours together in safety. That is, unless Mr. Bentley advises something different."

"You look worn out, Nate," observed Kit, sympathetically.

"I should think I might be," shivered the boy. "Yes, I'm all in for a sleep."

"Why can't you and Tom go into the inner bedroom and sleep through the day?" whispered Nance, eagerly. "He's all tired out, too, poor fellow. We'll mount guard while you two sleep."

So Tom Treadwell was allowed to come out of the cupboard, and he and Nate were promptly stowed away for their rest.

It was dark, when Nance called them. Kit, in the meantime, had slipped out to her mother's dressmaking shop and had returned with a black dress, bonnet and veil for a very tall woman.

"We're going to masquerade you, Tom, dear," whispered Nance, pointing to the feminine raiment, at which Tom made a humorously wry face.

But all the same, it proved a handy costume, and Kit's skilful fingers made it fit as if it had been ordered for the big, athletic fellow who now wore it.

The girls smuggled in some supper, which the two lovers ate with fine relish.

Then, about ten o'clock, Nate slipped down to the hotel office. It was almost deserted. Neither Gregg nor Purrman were in sight.

"Oh, said Nate, suddenly, as if remembering something, and turning toward the desk. "I don't want to disturb Miss

Graylock by going upstairs again at this time of the night. But will you kindly send this note up?"

Nate scribbled a few words, handing the envelope to the night clerk.

Up went the note, and then Nate, strolling slowly through the office emerged upon the sidewalk.

For just an instant he stood at the corner. There he was joined by Tom, whom Kit had slyly piloted down the back stairs.

Tom appeared to ask something in a low tone.

"Why, madame," responded Nate, politely, "I shall be delighted to show you the way myself. It's on my way home."

That was for the benefit of any watcher who might be prowling about the neighborhood.

The two moved off together. Nate soon heaved a sigh of relief when he felt that they were not being followed.

There was not another soul in sight as they turned into the mill-yard.

In another moment they were safely by Abner Macey, who was still rather drowsily on guard.

Tom went in and had a look at Will, still slumbering under the influence of drugs.

Then, after a few moments, they came out, after pressing the hand of Mr. Slater.

"Now," whispered Nate, who was carrying the lantern, "I'll show you up to the grain room. It's a bully, safe place!"

But just at this instant there were sounds of commotion at the door.

In a twinkling there was a rush of feet on the stairs, while the glare of pocket searchlights streamed up at them.

"Officers," rang Gregg's triumphant voice, "you'll find Tom Treadwell wrapped up inside those women's clothes!"

"And," rasped Lawyer Purrman's voice, "you'll have evidence enough, now, that Nate Fletcher is engaged in helping a fugitive escape from justice!"

Poor Nate and Tom!

They were utterly bewildered and overwhelmed when they found themselves in the clutches of three deputies.

The lightning had struck!

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"Handcuff 'em quick! They're desperate!" yelled Jasper Gregg, who was keeping in the background.

"Officers, you'll be held responsible if you let either of these criminals get away this time," uttered Lawyer Purrman, almost harshly for that oily man.

"Oh, bosh!" retorted Nate, disgustedly. "Don't let us have so much noise here. There's a very sick boy in that room—a young fellow who has been fearfully mistreated through Gregg's orders. Let's go down into the office, officers. If there seems to be anything at all against us, we'll go along with you peaceably enough. We're not going to fight or fly—or even try to."

"Handcuff 'em right now!" shrieked Jasper Gregg. But the chief of the deputies shook his head.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Gregg. We three officers can hold 'em. We've got revolvers to shoot 'em with if they try to make a break away from us."

Gregg was muttering and very ill at ease when Nate led the way into the office.

Tom, who had been tottering, suddenly staggered and fell.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" cried Nate, rushing to his friend and kneeling beside him.

But Tom, with one hand over his heart, and looking badly frightened, moaned only:

"Water! Quick!"

Nate ran to the tap, filling a pitcher and pouring some out into a goblet. Then, supporting Tom's head, he poured some of the water down Treadwell's throat.

"Excitement too much for the heart!" breathed Tom, hoarsely. "Heart trouble runs in the family."

"Great Scot!" cried Nate anxiously. "We've got to have a doctor here mighty soon. Abner!"

Macey, his eyes rather wide open, was hovering at the office door.

"Abner," quivered Nate, writing a few words on a card, "take this on the run to Miss Nance Graylock, at the hotel. Then get Dr. Spencer, or whatever other doctor Miss Graylock prefers. Rush! It's a matter of life and death!"

Snatching at the card honest Abner fairly raced away from the mill.

"All bosh and humbug!" quavered Jasper Gregg. "Officers, you're responsible for getting these prisoners to the lock-up at once. Don't let them play such a trick on you."

Nate turned to the scoundrel, quivering with wrath.

"Be still, you beast!" the boy cried, indignantly. "You're in the presence of a very sick man—perhaps a dying one. His death will be on your head, too, you miserable old sinner! You'll have it to think of when your dying hour comes!"

Jasper Gregg changed color swiftly. He was fearfully afraid of death, as Nate had discovered when the mad bull charged through Main Street the day before.

"Officers," pleaded Nate, "you won't allow my friend to be moved or bothered until the doctor has arrived, will you?"

"No, of course not," spoke the chief deputy, promptly. "The doctor will be boss now."

Tom lay on the floor, breathing but slightly, yet writhing a good deal. Nate, with a glass of water, hovered close.

Jasper Gregg stood looking on suspiciously.

"Trick," he sneered.

But the chief deputy, who had just knelt to feel Treadwell's pulse, came back to murmur in Gregg's ear:

"That poor fellow's pulse is mighty shabby. I shouldn't wonder if the Creator rescues our prisoner from us. These sudden heart attacks, under great grief or shock, you know ——"

Jasper Gregg shuddered. Afraid of death himself, he trembled even in presence of death.

From watching and growing steadily more frightened, Gregg soon began to feel a bit queer around his own heart.

Knowing that he would find no sympathy in that crowd, he turned and made toward the table on which the pitcher had rested.

But Nate had the pitcher, as well as a glass, at Tom's side, now.

However, a glass, filled with water, stood on the table.

With trembling fingers Gregg lifted the glass to his lips and drained the glass.

Crash! Nate, returning with the pitcher, dropped it, starting in terror at Gregg.

"You didn't drink out of that green goblet?" almost screamed young Fletcher.

"Yes," gasped Jasper Gregg, turning green with sudden fright. "Anything wrong with it?"

"Wrong?" shuddered Nate, clutching at a chair to steady himself, "Wrong? That green glass contained rat poison that I had mixed to use in the grain room!"

Thud! Jasper Gregg collapsed and lay stretched on the floor.

Nate was kneeling beside him, his face full of consternation.

"I—I didn't know the stuff would work as quick as that," he faltered. "But, oh, the stuff's deadly!"

Tom was getting but scant attention, now, as those present made haste to get close to Jasper Gregg, now in convulsions.

Nate looked up at the deputy with horror written in every line of his face.

"Th—they won't hang me for murder, will they?" he faltered. "I didn't know he was going to drink that stuff. I—I didn't put it there on purpose for him. I swear I didn't!"

"You did—you murdered!" gasped Gregg, holding to his stomach in awful agony.

"Oh, will that doctor never come!" groaned Nate. "And two dying men needing him!"

"Oh, I won't die!" shrieked Jasper Gregg, rolling worse than ever. "Oh, Lord, don't let me die! I'll do better after this!"

"Don't take it as badly as this," urged Nate, in a shaking voice, as he knelt once more beside the suffering man. "See how bravely, coolly, Treadwell takes his blow. He isn't afraid to die!"

"Die!" shrieked Gregg. "I don't want to die! I won't die; Lord of Mercy!"

The sufferer's lips moved tremulously. He was praying to himself. Then —

"Purrman!" he groaned. "Run for a doctor!"

"I don't want to leave you, Mr. Gregg," returned the lawyer, in a shaking voice.

"Go, Purrman—go, I tell you! Run!"

"Not and leave you in this crowd, Mr. Gregg," replied the lawyer, more firmly.

"Purrman, you scoundrel!" shrieked the sufferer. "You

rush off for a doctor at once, or I'll call for pen and paper and cut you out from my will."

For only an instant did the lawyer hesitate. Then:

"Keep up your grit, Mr. Gregg! You won't die right off! I'll have a doctor here in a jiffy—as soon as I can get one and rush him here!"

With that, the lawyer streaked through the door.

Nate rose and went over to Tom, who, lying with his eyes closed, seemed to be resting more quietly, but breathing very little.

The chief deputy stepped forward to lay a hand on Nate's shoulder, but the boy shook him off, and looked up, crying out:

"Don't interrupt. These men will both be soon out of this life. One has done the other a grievous harm. If Mr. Gregg is still conscious enough I am suggesting that he make his peace with Heaven now."

"Oh, oh, oh!" sobbed the sufferer.

"Gregg," Nate went on resolutely, "you cooked up that defalcation charge against Tom Treadwell, didn't you? You really got the money, and then made it appear that he had stolen it, didn't you? Come, since you will both be through with this life, look up to heaven, man and tell the exact truth! Didn't you plot against Tom Treadwell just as I have stated?"

"Yes," whispered the sufferer.

Then, after another writhe of pain:

"Oh, it's all true! It's all true! I'm the vilest sinner that ever lived, and now I've got to go Up Above and answer for my sins! O, Lord—have mercy!"

"Let one of these officers take your statement in writing," murmured Nate, softly, drawing out fountain pen and a pad of paper. "Tell the exact truth, Mr. Gregg! An honest confession, full, free and frank, will do more than anything else can do to make your last peace with heaven!"

Jasper Gregg, shaking, green and frothing in his agony, groaned out the sentences of that confession of the series of dastardly outrages against Tom Treadwell. He told, also, of his enmity for Nate, and of the ways he had tried to crush the boy.

"But why were you so anxious to crush me?" questioned our hero. "Why did you strive so to ruin me, even when you knew that Nance Graylock would never have you under any conditions?"

"Because," moaned Gregg, "if I—I didn't crush you, then you and the Slater boy might have proved what you overheard me saying to Purrman. Then Tom Treadwell would not only get off, but he would have had a splendid case against me for great damages!"

The chief deputy, listening, wrote this down.

"And you are making all this as your dying statement to right a great wrong you have done?" asked Nate.

"Yes. Oh, yes! O-o-o-h! This agony is fearful." Won't that doctor ever come?"

"I wish we had a notary here," sighed Nate, looking around him.

"I'm a notary public," murmured one of the deputies.

"Then, for heaven's sake," quivered Nate, "get in and take that man's signature under oath before it's too late."

Gregg was slightly raised and supported while his trembling fingers signed that statement of past unutterable wickedness.

The notary acknowledged, the rest standing solemnly by as witnesses.

"Is that someone coming now?" muttered Nate, stepping toward the window. "You there, Abner Macey?"

"Coming!" replied Macey.

"Hullo!" roared Abner, who had just had a whispered word from Nate, "What ails the old chap?"

"Oh, its terrible," shuddered Nate. "He drank the rat poison that I had mixed in the green glass."

"Did, eh?" blurted Abner. "Then he's a mighty clever one—for I spread that rat poison in the grain room this afternoon, as you asked me to, Nate. I've had two or three drinks out of that green glass since then."

"There's no sign of poison about you, man!" spoke Dr. Spencer, sharply, after a look at Jasper Gregg.

"O-o-o-oh! I'm in such awful agony, doctor!" moaned the wretch.

"Then its because you're very much afraid of death, and have a strong imagination;" laughed the doctor, rising. "Get up and brace up! You've heard Mr. Macey say that there wasn't any poison in the glass."

Just at this moment Lawyer Purrman rushed in breathlessly with another doctor. The second medical man confirmed the statement of the first.

Then Gregg got upon his feet, his face white as chalk from another cause.

"Give me that paper I was tricked into signing!" he screamed, flying at the chief deputy.

But Nate, stepping in between them, knocked Jasper Gregg spinning across the room.

"What paper?" gasped Lawyer Purrman.

He found out quickly enough. Both the lawyer and his employer threatened, stormed and bullied, but all to no avail.

"I'm feeling a good deal better already," laughed Tom Treadwell, leaping to his feet and throwing an arm around Nance. "But those heart attacks are surely awful while they last!"

Then his happy, roaring laugh seemed to shake the timbers of the mill.

"Officer," hinted Nate to the chief deputy, "I don't suppose you want us as badly as you did?"

"With this paper that I've got?" grinned the deputy. "No, I don't believe I do."

He passed it to Tom. Jasper Gregg was again watchful for a chance to snatch it, but Nate had lynx-like eyes working with Gregg.

"Come," said Nate, suddenly, "this is my mill, and I don't want trash in it. You two fellows"—to Gregg and Purrman—"will be trespassing if you stay here any longer, and then I shall call upon the officers to throw you out."

The two scoundrels departed, but breathing threats of vengeance.

"Mr. Nate Fletcher," said the chief deputy, solemnly, "my hat's off to you!"

The officers soon departed—of course without the prisoners they had come after.

"And to think, Nate," whispered Kit, as soon as she got a chance, "how we all used to think you hadn't brains or push enough to get on in the world!"

"Well," grinned the happy youngster, sheepishly, remembering that night at Hunter's Point, "I guess I was Kicked Into Luck, if ever anyone was!"

Luck, indeed! For Phil Bentley and other friends of Tom took charge of the matter for him for a while.

They didn't have Gregg or Purrman arrested, but they made the former settle out of court for a very comfortable fortune in the way of damages.

With that money Tom and Nance married, and are famously happy.

But grateful Tom saw that Nate and Will, who presently recovered, were splendidly remembered.

Nate married Kit happily in time, and Will wedded Polly Brander.

The two young men went into business right in Dreamhaven, on the money that Tom turned over. The two partners own not only the mill, but a very large part of all the other valuable business property in Dreamhaven.

Aunt Minnie is having the time of her life these days.

The rascals who maltreated Will so fearfully at the time that he succeeded in escaping from them up at the pit, escaped from Dreamhaven.

But, if they have gone the usual way of criminals, they are no doubt behind the bars for some other crime by this time.

But Nate and his wife are happy, anyway.

They don't need any more luck than they've got.

(THE END.)

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